

GEORGE GISSING

A Critical Study

by

FRANK

SWINNERTON



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GEORGE GISSING

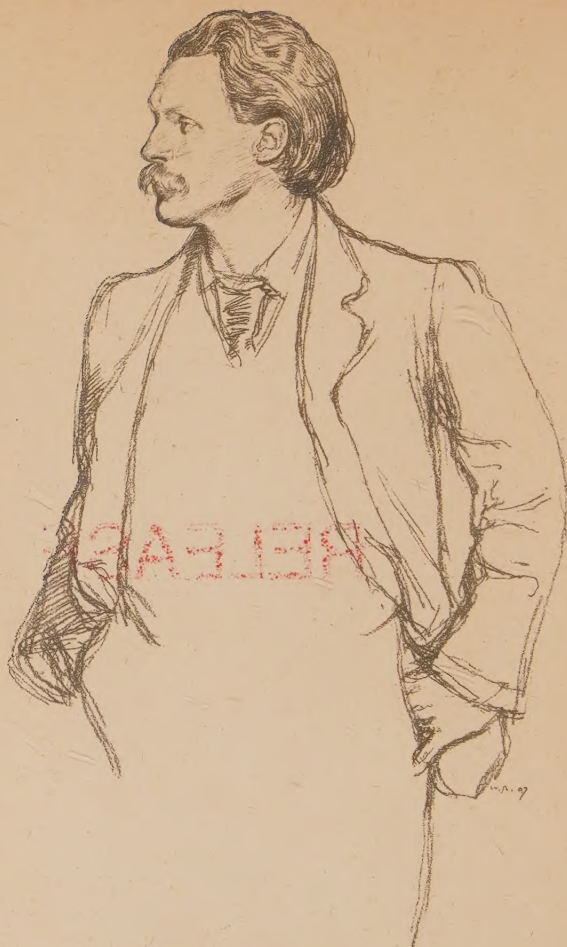
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GEORGE GISSING

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GEORGE GISSING: *A Critical Study*



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George Gissing

A Critical Study

by

Frank Swinnerton

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4717
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1924

London: Martin Secker

First Published 1912
New Edition, reset, 1924

LONDON: MARTIN SECKER (LTD) 1924

TO
M. & F. W. WHELDON

PREFACE

THIS is a new edition of a book first published in 1912, and I think it necessary that the fact should immediately be stated because a number of opinions are voiced in the course of the book which if I were writing such a study now for the first time I might express differently. Nevertheless, I have been carefully through a set of sheets of the first edition, and when they seemed imperative in the circumstances I have made some revisions. These in general have tended in one direction, although most of them have been elucidatory. The truth is that it is extremely difficult to read through the works of a single, fairly prolific, novelist of marked temperament without coming into personal collision with that novelist. At least, it is difficult for me to do so. I start with the utmost candour, and I conclude with what seems to me at the time to be equal candour. But in retrospect I perceive that the journey has been a long and rather tiring one, and that while a single adverse comment may be the outcome of unbiased judgment, repeated adverse comments must be sparingly made if they are not to emphasise the critic's

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tiredness rather than the purity of his candour. In the first edition too many of the praises of Gissing were followed—as if automatically—with a severe modification little likely to allow the praise to impress the reader's memory. Re-reading myself, I am constrained and embarrassed as I should be at any other ungenerosity. The late Mr. Thomas Seccombe, who was extremely kind to me when I approached him for help in the biographical section of the book, wrote about it in the American as well as the English press with something like hatred. He considered my criticisms of Gissing unanswerable, but he resented them. And upon one occasion he referred to the book in the course of an article upon another subject as "Mr. Swinnerton's able depreciation." The present is the first opportunity I have had of saying that I had planned to write a "critical study," and not an essay in laudation; but after this lapse of time I fancy I have discovered some justification of Mr. Seccombe's humorous bitterness in several phrases expressive of weariness. These phrases I have omitted from the new edition. I have turned one or two others; and I have interpolated several fresh and exhilarating passages which may be welcome. But there is no essential change in the book. It was always a scrupulous piece of work, which did

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not aim at brilliance, and while the author of it was a man not very old in years he was one whose experience of the very kind of life which Gissing often described gave him a particular justification for strictures upon Gissing's unsympathetic attitude to that kind of life and to the people whose circumstances compelled them to live it.

FRANK SWINNERTON.

September, 1923.

NOTE TO THE FIRST EDITION

I WISH to thank Mrs. H. G. Wells, Mr. Thomas Seccombe, and Mr. George Whale for kind assistance in the preparation of the first chapter of this book. Mr. Seccombe generously allowed me to make use of his Introduction to *The House of Cobwebs* and to read both the MS. and proof of his article on Gissing for The Dictionary of National Biography. To him my thanks are chiefly due. Mr. Whale, a friend of Gissing's from 1896 onwards, also made valuable suggestions; while Mr. H. G. Wells and Mr. Austin Harrison have consented to the quotations from their essays upon Gissing. Responsibility for the opinions expressed rests, however, with me alone, because the greater part of the chapter is founded upon a careful study of Gissing's work.

The various quotations appear by permission of Gissing's executors, and of Messrs. Constable and Co., Ltd., Smith, Elder, and Co., Chapman and Hall, Ltd., The Gresham Publishing Co., Sidgwick and Jackson, Ltd., and Methuen and Co., Ltd., the publishers of Gissing's books.

F. S.

October, 1912.

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I

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I

A CURIOUS essay might be written—if data were available—upon the impulse which has led different men and women to practise the craft of novel-writing. In many cases some deep interest in others may have been responsible; and in most we shall probably not be far wrong if we assume that the interest was in the novelist himself. Just as most of us like talking about ourselves, so the writer is one who seeks an audience outside the family circle. His aim is wider; and in the extent of his popularity may be found—not necessarily his worth, but rather the degree of his power to absorb others in what absorbs himself. The good talker is separated from the bore by the amount of interest which he can evoke in others for the recital of his great concern with his own affairs. The pre-occupation in both cases is the same. It is with the talker's ego. The novelist is a talker who writes. But he sees himself at an angle; he pro-

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jects himself into other people. He makes others see what he sees and feel what he feels. This the bore—and the mediocre novelist—can never do. It is a quite special gift, producing great wealth of affection; or, if not wholly of affection, at least of fear, resentment, and that mingling of curiosity with hostility which we all experience in contact with somebody who excites more of our esteem than we willingly grant. The novelist nowadays who stands out from his fellows does so in virtue of his personality. Other men and women may write, or may seem to write, better novels; but once we desire to read a book because So-and-so has written it (and not because it has a title or a theme that promises excitement or amusement) we are paying tribute to the interest of the novelist's personality and to the infectiousness of his egotism. He has been able, that is, to make us recognise him, even in the printed word, as an individual.

Now Gissing was an egotist of a particular kind. He was a man who was temperamentally unhappy, and the question whether a man who is temperamentally unhappy is to be admired or pitied is seldom considered by those whose standards are regulated by convenience or conventional life. He finds himself at war with life; and, with the instinct of self-justification at work, he begins to exaggerate the differences be-

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tween his own nature and the natures of those with whom he is brought into contact. He does this often because he feels inferior to others, but in the effort to redress the balance of success and failure it does happen that inferiority and superiority are confused in his mind, and a terrible conflict is thus created. Almost any degree of introspection involves retirement from the life of ordinary people; but a man without social sense is apt to become misanthropical, and for a writer the hatred of ordinary standards is perhaps the severest of all handicaps. Gissing was so handicapped. He did not love his fellow men. He had suffered much, and he was, during the greater part of his life, expressing his suffering in terms of his distaste. For that reason, although he is often mentioned by those who write about novels, he is not very much read by the fashionable; and indeed at the present time I believe the greatest readers of his books are to be found less among those who can appreciate their value than among those who find in the novels an expression of their own bitter, egotistical hostility to life. He is thus, if I am right, helping discontent to arise in the mediocre. It is not that he had any liking for mediocrity—he hated it; nor that his books are addressed to stupid people. But in the nature of things his books will be increasingly read by ill-educated

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egoists, because they voice numerous dislikes—of the vulgar herd, of conventional Christians, and so on—which are capable of flattering a sense of superiority in mis-cultured readers. The ideas he expressed have, as it were, percolated through the strata of intellectual and intelligent people, and they are now food for the agitated lower middle-class. Accordingly, it is among members of that class that Gissing is at present finding his most constant readers.

The middle-class proper, the members of which form the mainstay of the English subscription libraries and of the reading public in countries other than England, never cultivated Gissing very thoroughly. It took on trust his pictures of low life, but as it found them tiresome and painful it dismissed him as "a terrible pessimist." The phrase was not very well chosen, and its interest for us lies solely in the picture it gives of a public trying to justify an aversion by means of moral disapproval. It was recently pointed out to me by a wise woman that personal moral disapproval was generally a form of jealousy; and when it is made sectionally, by a class, it is most often the expression of vehement antipathy to some unanswerable challenge which carries dread and discomfort into the bosoms of men. Gissing was not a philosophical pessimist; he was a man who preferred

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his own thoughts to the world he dimly apprehended beyond the circle of his immediate surroundings. He was temperamentally an egoist, a student, and a solitary. The affairs of common life both shocked and preoccupied him. Literature and ancient history were his chosen studies; mankind he saw only through the sufferings which attended the limitations of his temperament and his own material difficulties. Thus, in the whole of his work, the world in which his characters live is bounded by material things, and his best books are studies of abnormal temperament.

Being an egoist, he dwelt frequently upon the egoistical temperament, on the point of individual frustration, of individual rebellion. He never in any large sense was a revolutionary, for this reason. His anger with the conditions of life was the anger simply of a man who finds himself out of sympathy with his familiars. It was instinctive, not philosophic, not social. That was why he never has had a very large appeal to those who would best have been able to appreciate the quality of his work.

II

George Robert Gissing was born in Wakefield on November 22, 1857. He was the eldest child

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of Thomas Waller Gissing, a pharmaceutical chemist, who was also an enthusiastic botanist, and a man of considerable individuality. It is difficult for us to know anything about his early years, although we know that his interest in books may be said to date from the time when, at the age of ten, he read *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Mr. Wells says that Gissing's father was "in a double sense the cardinal formative influence in his life. The tones of his father's voice, his father's gestures, never departed from him; when he read aloud, particularly if it was poetry he read, his father returned in him. He could draw in those days with skill and vigour—it will seem significant to many that he was particularly fascinated by Hogarth's work, and that he copied and imitated it—and his father's well-stocked library and his father's encouragement had quickened his imagination and given it its enduring bias for literary activity." Gissing's father died, it seems, before the boy was thirteen, and at that age he went to the Lindow Grove boarding-school at Alderley Edge, where he was "the eldest and most zealous of three brothers." Here he worked with tremendous exertion, little concerned with games, but even at this time seeking recreation and solitude in long walks. Only in occasional "violent bouts of tilting" did Gissing show himself as other

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boys; and we learn that he rose to eminence in connection with the performances on half-yearly speech-nights of Greek, French, or English plays. Otherwise he shunned rather than sought fellowship, and if an anecdote in *Henry Rye-croft* may be taken as applying to himself, his knowledge of his lessons was acquired as much by will as by inclination. He describes himself thinking that if other boys could understand the work, he ought to do so; "and in a measure succeeded. In a measure only; there was always a limit at which my powers failed me, strive as I would."

In 1872, before he was fifteen, Gissing won the junior exhibition (involving free tuition for three sessions) granted by Owens College, Manchester, to the candidates most distinguished in the Oxford and Cambridge Local Examination. In order that he might take advantage of this exhibition the age-limit (the minimum age prescribed in the regulations of the college being fifteen) must have been a little strained; but we are told by Professor A. S. Wilkins that as subsequent candidates also qualified under the required age the exhibition was later withdrawn. At Owens College Gissing continued his course of fierce work. He walked much alone, shunned companionship here as he had done at Alderley, "worked as he walked, and was marked down as

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a 'pot-hunter.' ” But his aims were achieved, at whatever cost. He gained in his first session Professor Ward's English Poem Prize, and a special prize and exhibition for classics, already his chief enthusiasm. In 1874, when he was only seventeen, Gissing “matriculated with high honours in the University of London, and in the following year he achieved the almost if not quite unique distinction of gaining, in the examination for honours following the Intermediate B.A., the first place in the first class with the University Exhibition in both Latin and English. He also won the Shakespeare Scholarship.” Mr. Wells says of Gissing's incessant labour: “The penalty came not in a palpable, definable illness, but in an abrupt, incongruous reaction and collapse. He truncated his career at Owens, with his degree incomplete . . . and from that time his is a broken and abnormal career.”

III

The occasion of Gissing's withdrawal from Owens, and the breaking of that succession of educational achievements, was the earliest result of the extraordinary ill-judgment which he showed in his sexual life. A connection formed in Manchester was followed by a marriage which was in every way unsuitable, and which

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was very seriously to add to his later embarrassments. Mr. Harrison, in alluding to this matter, describes it as "decisive upon Gissing's whole future," and this is hardly an exaggeration. Lonely, needing female companionship, seeking it in the most obvious way, Gissing made the acquaintance of a young woman who was already selling herself to such as he. There was an attempt to assist her to a means of livelihood less discreditable; it failed; Gissing himself was involved in an offence against the law; and the consequences were tragic. He was imprisoned, and was sent by his friends to America. Upon his return he married his young friend, honestly and sincerely doing that which ruined his own life and did not turn his wife from the path which nature had already set for her.

For a time, during his American adventure, Gissing had money to live upon, and, in addition to writing, for a time taught the classics in Boston; but as the days went on his money became less, so that a decisive step of some kind was necessary. He went West, taking an emigrant ticket for Chicago. Here he seems to have had some literary success, the proceeds of which for some time kept him alive. But he did not make enough money to pay his fare home to England. The piracy of one of his stories (contributed to a Chicago paper) by a paper published in Troy,

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N. Y., led him to suppose that the latter town might offer a good market for his work. Unfortunately he was told by the pirate that editors in Troy could "get as much of such stuff as they wanted without paying for it"; and, almost utterly destitute, he was reduced for days to the basest lodgings and a diet of peanuts. Then, one afternoon, he found in a lawyer's office the only example of sympathy and kindness that he could afterwards recall. An odd-looking old man, in shabby black, who was reading the Bible in his dinner-hour, recommended him to a man he knew who was in need of an assistant.

In *New Grub Street*, Gissing describes this man as a photographer who sought orders for the photographic reproduction of old portraits. In some very interesting *Recollections of George Gissing*, published in "The Gentleman's Magazine" for February, 1906, however, the man is described as a traveller in gas-fittings. "The agent did the necessary booming, and Gissing the practical demonstration, going to out-of-the-way country places and seeing an America few English people know." But his association with this travelling agent did not last, for the reason, it is suggested, that Gissing proved not sufficiently "practical."

After what was perhaps his bitterest experience of hardship, Gissing returned to Europe—

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to Germany. Here, "in the quiet atmosphere of a German university town," he both taught and studied. He also made the acquaintance of Edward Bertz, who figured in *The Unclassed* as Julian Casti. Together, the two young men developed their dialectical powers, and they remained lifelong correspondents. It was at Jena that Gissing became familiar with modern philosophic writings, while also, we may suppose, he continued his studies in classical literature and history. In the philosophical progress of the heroine of *Workers in the Dawn* we may find echoes of his own work. He read "Schiller, Goethe, Häckel, Schopenhauer, innumerable German tomes on ancient philosophy," says Mr. Harrison. His reading was directed to Positivism and the works of Comte, a very significant fact in relation to the character of his early novels; and the reading of Strauss's *Leben Jesu* was "like the first ray of heavenly light piercing the darkness of a night of anguish and striving and woe unutterable." In *Workers in the Dawn* he writes:—

Schopenhauer, Comte, and Shelley—these three in turn have directed the growth of my moral life. Schopenhauer taught me to forget myself and to live in others. Comte then came to me with his lucid unfolding of the mystery of the world, and taught me the use to which my sympathy should be directed. Last of all Shelley breathed with the breath of life on the dry bones of scientific theory,

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turned conviction into passion, lit the heavens of the future with such glorious rays that the eye struggles in gazing upwards, strengthened the heart with enthusiasm as with a coat of mail.

Such enthusiasm, of course, was splendid; such reading, however, is not the best preparation for a novelist's craft. Gissing returned to London with a head so full of ideas as to overweight any but a physically strong man. His interest in ideas and in books had been cultivated to the ruin of his purely human sympathies. He came to England burning with thoughts about life, but alienated from the ordinary paths of human experience.

IV

His life in London during the period following his German stay must have been full of misery. To this period, according to Mr. Austin Harrison, must be confined those often-described sufferings when Gissing was "the literary jetsam of garret and cellar tossed hither and thither by poverty and hunger in the grim immensity of London." His only intimate friend was Mr. Morley Roberts, like Gissing an Owens College man, two or three years his junior, and like Gissing compelled to make his way against the discouragements besetting all those who live by literature. The British Museum Reading Room

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was open to him when he was twenty-one, and of the opportunities it offered of further study he availed himself thankfully. It was no doubt at this time that Gissing made acquaintance with the garret, and later with the cellar to which economic reasons dictated his removal. Ruefully, Gissing exclaims regarding the move from garret to cellar: "There was a difference, if I remember rightly, of sixpence a week. . . . The front cellar was stone-floored; its furniture was a table, a chair, a washstand, and a bed; the window, which of course had never been cleaned since it was put in, received light through a flat grating in the alley above. Here I lived; here I *wrote*." Here, too, Gissing tasted the poor man's joys in pease-pudding ("magnificent pennyworths at a shop in Cleveland Street, of a very rich quality indeed"), as well as "excellent faggots." Here he worked as severely as ever, both teaching and writing; but principally reading classical authors at the Museum, and grudging time spent away from them. His teaching was mostly a matter of "coaching," and he tells in *Henry Ryecroft* of how, when he coached a business man for the London matriculation, he had to rise at half-past five in the morning and walk from Hampstead Road to Knightsbridge in order to reach his pupil by half-past six—that being the only hour at which he could conve-

niently be received. Long rambles about London showed him the seamy outdoor side of poor life; at this time holidays, even country walks, were denied to him. His only solaces were found in the companionship of his one friend, in reading all manner of books, in reading particularly Forster's *Dickens*.

Of Forster's book he was later to speak in terms of warm praise, for the purchase of it opened a new phase in his love for his great Victorian idol. "To me," he says, "it yielded such special sustenance as, in those days, I could not have found elsewhere, and, lacking which, I should perhaps have failed by the way." Yet at this time he was writing to his sister that he worked "with fervour and delight"; and he had written *Workers in the Dawn*. A legacy of £100 enabled him to pay for the publication in 1880 of this novel, and although its sale was inconsiderable, a copy sent to Mr. Frederic Harrison produced valuable results.

Mr. Frederic Harrison tells, in his preface to *Veranilda*, how the book and the writer interested him. With a considerable kindness he not only recommended Gissing to the notice of Lord Morley, who was then editor of "The Pall Mall Gazette," but engaged the young man as classical tutor to his two elder sons. The first meeting of Gissing with his young pupils is delightfully

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described by Mr. Austin Harrison in an article in "The Nineteenth Century." Mr. Harrison writes:—

Tall, spare, and lissom of movement, George Gissing had a marked personality even then. Here is a conscious autobiographical portrait of himself taken from his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*. "His eyes were of light blue, his nose was of a Grecian type, his lips and chin were moulded in form expressive of extreme sensibility and gentleness of disposition, showing traces, moreover, of instability in moral character." Thick, brown hair clustered round a brow of noble shape; his head was well shaped. Though his cheeks lacked colour he looked healthy, strong and vigorous. His facial expression was extraordinarily mobile, sensitive, and intellectual. I have never seen so sad and pathetic a face. In repose his features contracted into a look of ineffable dreariness, sorrow and affliction, of mute submissiveness and despair. Yet it was a noble face, dignified, delicate, sensuous, thoughtful. And then it would flash and light up, and the eyes would beam in radiant transport, and the misanthrope would become a tempestuous schoolboy, and he would thump the table and positively shout with buoyant exuberance.

V

Through Mr. Frederic Harrison Gissing obtained other pupils, whom he taught in the day-time, while giving his "leisure" hours to writing and reading. Upon the publication in "The Pall Mall Gazette" of a short sketch, he was entreated to write more; but from journalistic work he vehemently abstained. He "would not degrade himself by such 'trash.'"

Yet we are assured by Mr. Austin Harrison that from 1882 onwards, Gissing had "a livable income derivable from teaching, which he could always increase or modify at will." Gissing's continued struggles with abject poverty Mr. Harrison describes as "fiction of fiction," and since Mr. Harrison constantly saw and visited Gissing and his friend during the years 1882-1890, "in Milton Street, in Chelsea, behind Madame Tussaud's, at Cornwall Residences and elsewhere," he should be regarded as giving us the most intimate description so far obtainable of Gissing's material conditions at this period of his life.

All this time Gissing was feeling his way to his own notion of what the novel should be. He was continuing that philosophical reflectiveness to which reference has already been made. He was also exploring the depths of his own nature. Even now he saw the danger of "that cold, critical spirit which makes me so intensely self-conscious." Later, he says: "Often, often, I would so gladly surrender myself to my instincts of passion and delight"; but "this restless scepticism has often been to me a torment." In *The Unclassed*, published in 1884, he analyses the philosophical doctrines of Pessimism and Optimism, without, however, doing more than exalt the individual nature and in the same breath

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pray to be delivered from its irresistible power. "He had never known, felt that he might never know, that sustained energy of imaginative and sensual longing which ideal passion demands. . . . Yet there remained that fatal conviction of the unreality of every self-persuasion save in relation to the influences of the moment."

Eager to write real novels, far away from conventional make-belief fiction which domesticated folk read to lift them out of what they call "sordid realities," he is yet perfectly aware of the limitations of his knowledge.

Let me get a little more experience (says Waymark), and I will write a novel such as no one has yet ventured to write, at all events in England. I begin to see my way to magnificent effects; ye gods, such light and shade! The fact is, the novel of every-day life is getting worn out. We must dig deeper, get into untouched social strata. Dickens felt this, but he had not the courage to face his subjects; his monthly numbers had to lie on the family tea-table. Not *virginibus puerisque* will be my book, I assure you, but for men and women who like to look beneath the surface, and who understand that only as artistic material has human life any significance. . . . Life as the source of splendid pictures, inexhaustible material for effects—that can reconcile me to existence, and that only.

Could there have been a more enthusiastic beginning? Equally good is another passage which I shall venture to quote:—

I have come out of all that, in proportion as my artistic self-consciousness has developed. For one thing, I am not so miserable as I was then, personally; then again, I have

found my vocation. You know pretty well the phases I have passed through. Upon ranting radicalism followed a period of philosophical study. My philosophy, I have come to see, was worth nothing; what philosophy is worth anything? It had its uses for myself, however; it made me by degrees self-conscious, and brought me to see that in art alone I could find full satisfaction.

In 1884, just after the publication of *The Unclassed*, Gissing had from Mr. Frederic Harrison the offer of further work; but he wrote that "almost a livelihood" was assured to him for some months, and spoke enthusiastically of many plans for work. At this time, too, he had some experience of "that well-millinered and tailored herd," of which he spoke so disdainfully in *Henry Ryecroft*; and Mr. Wells says that "he entered spheres where bishops' wives are not unknown, and has described to the present writer a conversation upon the decay of butlers with one of these ladies." It is Mr. Wells who gives us an explanation which I think goes far to reconcile Gissing's stories of his own poverty, the poverty-legend, and Mr. Austin Harrison's account. He says:—

It will be incredible to every level-minded reader, but, as a matter of fact, he maintained this fair appearance, he received his pupils in his apartment, he toiled and wrote unceasingly, upon scarcely any food at all. Partly, no doubt, it was poverty: he grudged every moment taken by teaching from his literary purpose, and taught as little as he could; but mainly it was sheer inability to manage. His meals were of bread and dripping, stewed tea, cheese

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at times, soup bought desiccated in penny packets, and such like victual; and a common friend, himself no mean novelist, has described his entertainment there of a Sunday afternoon;—Gissing, with flushed face and shining eyes, declaiming Greek choruses and capping sonorous quotations—"There are miserable wretches," he would say, "who know not the difference between dochmiacs and antispasts!"—until hunger could wait no longer. Thereupon he would become spasmodically culinary in a swift anti-climax: "Now for the squalid meal!"

That this was a time of great literary activity we can have no doubt. Both *Isabel Clarendon* and *Demos* appeared in 1886; and we are told that, as the latter went into a second edition, the proceeds (£50) enabled Gissing to put into execution a long-cherished plan for going to Italy. Still teaching, writing, and reading, he published in 1887 *Thyrza* (Mr. Seccombe thinks this was written before *Demos*), in 1888 *A Life's Morning*, in 1889 *The Nether World*, and in 1890 *The Emancipated*, in which book he for the first time made use of his Italian experience. In this year, his first wife having died, he remarried, again with unfortunate results. Meanwhile, the prices paid for his work were increasing, so that when, in 1891, he published *New Grub Street*, he received for the copyright the sum of £250. "This," says Mr. Seccombe, "proved anything but a prosperous speculation from the publisher's point of view"; but all the

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same Gissing had received £200 a couple of years previously for *The Nether World*.

Of Gissing's definite actions in the years between 1891 and 1897 we know very little, save that he was now comparatively successful, and able to live with greater ease. In 1892 he made the acquaintance of George Meredith,* who had for some time admired his work, and who had certainly influenced Gissing in such a book as *A Life's Morning*. It is also certain that he several times visited his old home, besides travelling in the South of England. Mr. George Whale, who was well acquainted with Gissing during this period, tells of Gissing's "horror of squalid quarters of the town as he looked from a balcony across to Lambeth and spoke of that part and its denizens." Mr. Whale recalls Gissing at a jovial meeting of the Omar Khayyám Club at Marlow; and explains that his friend went to Budleigh Salterton in 1897 for reasons of health, because he could not live in or near London except in the summer. At this time, also, Gissing was acquainted with the late Grant

* This, however, was not their first meeting, which had taken place many years before at the office of Messrs. Chapman and Hall. Meredith, when reader to that firm, discussed with the author certain revisions to be made in *The Unclassed*. Mr. B. W. Matz, in an article entitled "Meredith as Publisher's Reader," in "The Fortnightly Review" for August, 1909, says of *Isabel Clarendon*: "It passed through Mr. Meredith's hand two or three times, and when we finally decided to publish it, it had been reduced from three volumes to two."

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Allen (with whose early novels, written under the pseudonym of "Cecil Power," those of Gissing may be interestingly contrasted). With Grant Allen, Mr. Whale remembers him talking over metres and capping quotations by the hour. It is therefore clear that his long neglect by people of his own intellectual calibre was at an end. It is interesting to hear from Mr. Austin Harrison, who adds other pleasant reminiscences, that Gissing once lodged above a composer of popular waltzes, because that fact accounts for the expert knowledge of the recipe for musical popularity shown in *The Whirlpool*; and we are glad to have glimpses of him in various connections in Mr. Harrison's essay. For the rest, we can only record that the order of his novels in these years shows unbroken work, as well as curious fluctuations of power. The fluctuations were due as much as anything to his uncertain health and the need for regular production, whether his illness hindered, or his mood made the task the harder. It is certain that he had very precarious health and strength in these days. Early privations and incessant labour at one or other form of mental activity combined to impair a constitution never at any time truly robust, and always subject to fits of nervous disorder or to languors consequent upon over-strain. The books appeared as follows:

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Denzil Quarrier and *Born in Exile*, 1892; *The Odd Women*, 1893; *In the Year of Jubilee*, 1894; *Eve's Ransom*, *The Paying Guest*, and *Sleeping Fires*, 1895; and *The Whirlpool*, 1897.

VI

Some time previous to 1897, Gissing made the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. H. G. Wells, who spent a spring-time holiday with him and his sister at Budleigh Salterton in that year. Mr. Wells speaks of him as "no longer the glorious, indefatigable, impracticable youth of the London flat, but a damaged and ailing man, full of ill-advised precautions against the imaginary illnesses that were his interpretations of a general *malaise*." The three friends walked much about the beautiful country around Budleigh Salterton; they heard much of his occupations, which were at that time those not of creation, but rather of absorption. He was busy with *Cassiodorus* and with papers referring to *Theodoric*; and even now was planning that sixth-century romance which at last was to be left incomplete. "As much as anything," Mr. Wells says, "he was homesick for Italy." And when they were near Lulworth Cove he one day showed suddenly the little treasures he carried as mementoes of a former visit to Italy—"treas-

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ured as one treasures the little things of those we love." It is little wonder that in this same year he is again in Italy, receiving the impressions which are gathered into *By the Ionian Sea*; and in November writing ecstatically to another friend—Mr. Edward Clodd—from Siena. "Chiefly," he says, "I am delighted here with the magnificent white oxen, with huge horns, which draw carts about the streets. Oxen and carts are precisely those of Virgil."

In Rome he again met Mr. and Mrs. Wells, and "there were tramps in the Campagna, in the Alban Hills, along the Via Clodia, and so forth, merry meals with the good red wine of Velletri or Grotta Ferrata." Here he had completed his plans for *Veranilda*; but he could only work intermittently at the book during the next few years. He was to publish three books in 1898—*Human Odds and Ends*, *Dickens*, and *The Town Traveller*, and one in 1899—*The Crown of Life*, before he recorded his Italian impressions in *By the Ionian Sea* (published, along with *Our Friend the Charlatan*, in 1901); and the short *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* were written while yet he was busy upon his historical novel. In the last years of his life he spent much time in the south of France, at Arcachon, St. Jean Pied de la Port, and St. Jean de Luz, in very delicate health, much occupied with

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Veranilda. From St. Jean Pied de la Port, in June, 1903, he wrote: "I have decided to write my sixth-century story. . . . If I have anything like decent health here I *must* get this book done." Four months later he was "past the middle," and hoped, "with trembling," to finish it by the end of the year. But he was never to finish *Veranilda*, for he caught cold in December, and pneumonia followed; and he died at St. Jean de Luz on December 28th, 1903. In the following year appeared *Veranilda*, lacking its final chapters; in 1905 *Will Warburton* was issued; and *The House of Cobwebs*, a collection of short stories, with a long critical and biographical introduction by Mr. Thomas Secombe, concluded his published work. Gissing left two sons by his second marriage, and to his sons was granted, in 1904, a joint pension from the Civil List during their minority. He had long been separated from his second wife.

VII

There has grown up a legend of Gissing's life which naturally is very picturesque, and which is exceedingly piteous. He has been thought of as one perpetually in want, a figure of tragic frustration. That figure, it is now known, through the essays of Mr. Wells and Mr.

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Harrison, has been falsely created in our minds. Frustration there was—of talent; but not wholly through an insufficiency of poor food and a surfeit of bad lodgings. The frustrate Gissing was, largely speaking, the real Gissing, the egoistic warrior against the things he disliked. He was handicapped by his nature, a nature which made him turn very frequently to the contemplation of pain, and dwell with mournful satisfaction upon sadness and melancholy. And it may perhaps be suggested that his insane work at school and at Owens was in itself a sign of weakness. It is to be noticed that one gets no impression of spontaneous work: it is dogged, persistent labour, prompted by emulation. That carried him far. Owens carried him farther. The experiences which preceded his sudden American flight were those of a boy, starved of romance, grasping at something which was to stand indeed in place of romance. The American troubles convinced Gissing of the prevalence of human unkindness. His German studies resolved themselves into an attempt to generalise his small experiences into a philosophic notion of life. It was youthful, egoistical, vain; but the attempt brought him to London incapable of looking without bias upon simple facts. He had now the generalising and moralising habit which is the novelist's danger. He could not see an incident

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without spinning from it—not a story, but a series of reflections. He was an essayist, a writer upon moral themes; and he began to write novels. What could be expected from such an equipment? His brain was already forced into certain grooves, and formed. He was finished, without any power of sudden expansion, such as it is the novelist's privilege to possess. Maturity he had, reflectiveness, intelligence—many things but the gift of flaming imagination, of complete self-forgetfulness (which he thought he had learned from Schopenhauer). So he began as a frustrate man of talent. His brain was too early mature. In books and books and more books lay his interests: in life lay the menace of material discomforts.

What Gissing calls "the course of an education essentially aristocratic"—he explains that "Greek and Latin can have no other tendency so long as they are the privilege of the few"—had caused him, he says, to "hoist the standard of idealism." But he soon began to find that novel-writing without many influential friends is a poor way of earning fame. He had friends, but lacked that particular quality which enables a man to accept generosity in a spirit of ease. It is evidently of himself he speaks when Milvain, in *New Grub Street*, says:—

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"There's a friend of mine who writes novels. His books are not works of genius, but they are glaringly distinct from the ordinary circulating novel. Well, after one or two attempts, he made half a success; that is to say, the publishers brought out a second edition of the book in a few months. There was his opportunity. But he couldn't use it; he had no friends, because he had no money. A book of half that merit, if written by a man in the position of Warbury when he started, would have established the reputation of a lifetime. . . . But the novel I'm speaking of was practically forgotten a year after its appearance."

Reardon, in another part of the same book, which is full of very interesting notes of Gissing's own literary experience, says that to have kept at his best he ought to have published only one book in every two or three years. But he knows that he could not have lived upon that. For Gissing, like Reardon, once begun, had to keep on at novel-writing; even when inclination rebelled. Often he would begin a book, only to feel utterly despondent. "I write twenty pages, perhaps, and then my courage fails. I am disgusted with the thing, and *can't* go on with it—*can't!*" Gissing proceeds to say of Reardon's condition that it is "a familiar symptom of the malady which falls upon outwearied imagination. . . . A sign of exhaustion, it of course made exhaustion more complete." So he suffered; yet is not this trouble the same that Gissing always had, at school, at college, in writing? The close labour, wearying his brain; the

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pertinacious resolve not to be defeated, sustained by pride, until his tired brain sagged or snapped? That was what made his later books comparatively insignificant. Just as he "crammed" knowledge, so he forced his brain to activity when he was writing. He lived always at high pressure, striving for something beyond his attainment. His was not quite a first-class brain; the strength of desire made him strive to do with sweat and toil what a man with a less sense of personal value would have left undone. He was flogging his brain all his life, sustained only by the self-confidence which was part of his nature, which drew him apart from his schoolfellows, which made him to the end a solitary figure. "Intensely self-conscious, he suffered" (this is written of the hero of *The Crown of Life*) "from a habit of comparing, contrasting himself with other men, with men who achieved things, who made their way, who played a part in the world. He could not read a newspaper without reflecting, sometimes bitterly, on the careers and position of men whose names were prominent in its columns."

VIII

It was ambition—at conflict with itself, often varying, never defined by any instinct other than

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that of feverish application—that poisoned Gissing's life. As a boy he made up his mind to *be* something; and his lifelong dissatisfaction was largely due to the feeling that he was not achieving his end. Only so can we understand his complaints of the world. It was not congenial to him to do journalistic work, because he wanted somehow to write masterpieces. He thought he could do what other men, other boys, were doing. We have only to examine the structure of some of his books—*Demos*, *The Nether World*, *The Whirlpool*, *In the Year of Jubilee*, to see how ambitious they are. Even in 1884 he wrote to Mrs. Frederic Harrison:—

A kind of exhaustion possesses me when I sit at my desk a quarter of an hour, and my will power gets weaker. At most I am able to produce a short poem now and then of a very savage character. Of course, all this means that the conditions of my life are preposterous. There is only one consolation, that, if I live through it, I shall have materials for a darker and stronger work than any our time has seen. If I can hold out till I have written some three or four books, I shall at all events have the satisfaction of knowing that I have left something too individual in tone to be neglected.

Beginning thus with tremendous belief in his own powers, hampered by his self-consciousness, which made his work too often “literary,” he found the public unmoved to any great extent. Admirers he had, of course, sincere and perceptive; but he makes one of his characters com-

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pare himself with "poor Jackson, the novelist," whose books, for fifteen years, had been described in the press as "above the average." His comment is: "This is damned poor consolation for a man with a temperament like mine!"

It was not that Gissing was entirely self-engrossed, or that he valued his work too highly. He spoke very generously of his contemporaries, and had a very clear idea of his personal faults. I think that probably he made no attempt to eradicate them; but he knew they were there. But as his books were conceived they were all-embracing in their range; as they were written they became, as most novels do become, shrunk, undersized versions of their first projection. Muffled as they were with explanatory words, they were muffled also by press and public. To Gissing this muffling must have been similar in effect to imprisonment in a small room. To him the eternal discouragement of living without distinction was paralysing. The self-confidence of his boyhood was that self-confidence which goes hand in hand with self-distrust. It perhaps was self-distrust just as much as self-belief that made him condemn the suggestions of journalistic work. He was conscious of abilities; he saw no reason why, with his talent, he should not enjoy that immunity from the fear of poverty which other, less talented, men took for

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granted. Why should he not be happy and safe from the dread of catastrophe? The thought was always with him; the sense of failure; the horrible suspicion, perhaps, that he might be destined for ever to fail. Gissing dwelt much upon his own imperfections; at the end of his life he did not think he had ever really been a man to deserve love. There was the temperament of the egoist—not the complacent egoist of whom Sir Willoughby Patterne is the type; nor the truculent egoist, like his own Alfred Yule; nor the graceful egoist caricatured by Dickens in *Bleak House*. It was the self-haunted egoist to whose type Gissing came nearest. Unpractical, life-shunning, complaining, ambitious, gentle, mournful, laughing aloud—Gissing is never a child, but always the thoughtful, elderly boy, too early self-educated out of his boyishness, self-confident, yet never quite self-reliant. He was oppressed by the immaturity, the practical inexperience of the egoist, who is never at ease in a world which simply ignores him without aggressiveness. And at the end of his life he was saying, and really meaning it:—

If I could but start again, with only the experience gained! I mean, make a new beginning of my intellectual life; nothing else, O heaven! nothing else.

Gissing's temperament comes to us through these books of his, so full as they are of definite

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self-exposition, much colder, much more, in a way, dead, than it comes from the recollections of his friends. He lacked that ease of personality that conveys itself subtly in the printed page: his was always, in his novels, the rather querulous, random self-expression of the serious egoist. This is the case even in *By the Ionian Sea*. Only in the appreciation of another novelist's work did he reveal himself with gentleness and delight. With such obstacles in the way of clear understanding, we can do no more than appraise Gissing's work, and grope, by what light we may gather, into the semi-darkness that envelops his personal character. This book does not claim to be more than a critical study of his novels.

II

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I

IT is very surprising, when one considers the whole of his work, that Gissing should be persistently described as the realistic historian of the lower classes, and particularly of the lower middle-class. Whether he knew anything about the professional and economically-independent classes or not, it is to these that he most often turns in what proves, on the whole, to be his best and most characteristic work. Of clerks, and of the ordinary wage-earning members of the lower middle class, he seems to have made practically no use in his novels; and where they appear, as in *Eve's Ransom*, *In the Year of Jubilee*, and *The Town Traveller*, they are generally so eccentric as to give the books no value as social studies. In several of his earlier novels, it is true, a number of the characters belonged to the lower orders; but in only one of them—*The Nether World*—were all the characters by birth proletarian. The bulk of what remains is com-

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posed of studies of the modern nervous temperament set against a background of the middle and professional classes. Also, in spite of the fact that Gissing is vaguely labelled a realist by those who suppose realism to connote everything dismal, it is among the studies of abnormal temperament that his most notable successes are to be found. In the books about the workers there is an absence of exact knowledge, due to his own temperamental lack of sympathy with the life he is describing; and in the few stories which touch the class named by one of his characters the "ignobly decent" ("the essentially unheroic . . . that vast majority of people who are at the mercy of paltry circumstance") only one—*The Odd Women*—has any claim to rank with his best books. In the studies of temperament, the quality of Gissing's work varies; but it is in the more deliberately personal of them, such as *New Grub Street* and *Born in Exile*, that he is sufficiently at ease to produce his most deeply felt and imagined novels, unhampered by the philosophical bias which at most times obscured his interest in pure character.

II

According to Mr. H. G. Wells, Gissing was fired, in his early years, to do for English

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life what Balzac had done for France in the *Comédie Humaine*—an extraordinarily ambitious dream for even the most sanguine young writer. Certainly, his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, showed him to be both inexperienced and irresolute, for the book has no Balzacian omniscience and romantic quality. It is a curious mixture of conventionalism, raw philosophy, imperfect observation, imperfect but laborious humour, and imitation of Dickens. That is to say, its descriptions of poor life in London have the peculiar humanitarian inexactitude of Dickens, combined with a fastidious indignation at the conditions amid which the London poor live. Never having lived in the spirit of the London poor, Gissing could not view dirt with the large tolerance of Dickens, in whom it was ingrained; but he was full of earnest desire to catch that reforming temper which marked the less humorous works of Dickens. Horror is the chief note sounded whenever the poor are under observation. He says:—

One could find matter for hour-long observation in the infinite variety of vice and misery depicted in the faces around. It must be confessed that the majority do not seem unhappy; they jest with each other amid their squalor; they have an evident pleasure in buying and selling; they would be surprised if they knew you pitied them. And the very fact that they are unconscious of their degradation affects one with all the keener pity. We suffer them to become brutes in our midst, and inhabit dens which clean

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animals would shun, to derive their joys from sources from which a cultivated mind shrinks as from a pestilential vapour. And can we console ourselves with the reflection that they do not feel their misery?

Or again, later in the book, he says:—

O, what a hell could I depict in the Whitecross Street of this Christmas Eve! Out of the very depths of human depravity bubbled up the foulest miasmata which the rottenness of the human heart can breed, usurping the dominion of the pure air of heaven, stifling a whole city with their infernal reek.

But, in spite of his horror, and his sense of the “inherent impracticability in the nature of the lower classes,” he is full of generous desire to deliver the poor from their hopeless scrambling existence. His endeavour is to draw attention to the state of things which he has seen in his walks in the neighbourhood of Whitecross Street; and he approvingly causes his heroine to organise some classes and some non-religious charities for the removal of the evil conditions. He is, in an incoherent way, striving to express here what as yet he has hardly grasped; and the evidence of his lack of grasp is to be found in the painfully grotesque pictures of individuals, partly drawn from his imagination and partly derived from Dickens. There is one suggestive study, immature and melodramatic, but interesting, in the young girl-wife of the hero, who cannot be weaned from drink, and who finds the lessons

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set by her patient lover so far beyond her power that she is provoked, through her own shame, into a resentful anger and fear. In the scenes between the two, Gissing at once strikes the note—the note of his own experience—which recurs again and again in his work—the marriage of a refined man with a girl who is either of a lower spiritual order or who is deficient in culture; and he gives us the first of a striking series of pictures showing two incompatible natures, each unable to respond to the other's point of view. That the fault of stupidity is almost invariably attributed in Gissing's studies to the woman, and the fault of weak generosity to the man, would in any case be interesting. At the present day, when the contrary state of affairs is much proclaimed by novelists, such an attitude would be heroic; at the date of Gissing's writing, however veracious it may have been, constant preoccupation with the wrongs of men was, perhaps, unchivalrous. At any rate, it is revealed as the author's opinion in *Workers in the Dawn* that Arthur Golding's generosity to the betrayed girl whom he married was both noble and disastrous. Gissing writes, after one of the quarrels to which allusion has been made:—

Carrie was all radiance at once, and as pretty a lover's tattle followed as novelist might wish to chronicle; but—somehow or other I have no taste for it. Perhaps the

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shadow of coming events falls already upon me and makes me gloomy.

So it is, for the book would be a painful one if it were not unimpressive. The heroine, a clergyman's daughter, dies young; and the hero throws himself into the Niagara Falls. There are many pages of the heroine's diary, filled with allusions to philosophical studies in Germany, and there is much very warm-hearted and intelligent (rather than profound) talk of the poor and of popular education. It is noticeable that at this time Gissing has hopes of benefiting the poor, by means of sufficient food, clothing, and primary education.

Even now, he will hear nothing of Christian dogma. His first philosophical—and therefore agnostic—clergyman appears early in the book, and the comic relief, of which there is fortunately very little, is supplied by a curate of forty—afterwards a fashionable vicar—whose pamphlet upon *Fundamental Ideas* reveals only three—the Inviolability of the Church as by Law established, the Immutability of the Poor Laws, and the Condemnability of Dissent. Gissing thinks, as he appears to have thought to the end, that there must always be rich and poor, but he is

not convinced that, of these rich and poor, the one must be a class of brute beasts—of ignorant, besotted, starving,

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soilworn creatures—whilst the other must be a class of lords and princes, spending in profitless luxuries—luxuries which perish with them and are of no further good to the world—riches which would suffice to put every poor man at his ease, which they obtain without labour, which serve only to rear generation after generation of vicious prodigals.

Gissing's philosophical democratic feeling, thus expressed, was not of a quality to last. In the character of Waymark, in *The Unclassed*, he admitted that his early championship of the poor and ignorant was nothing more nor less than disguised zeal on behalf of his own starved passions; in *Demos* he emphasised this point by exclaiming, "Never trust the thoroughness of the man who is a revolutionist on abstract principles; personal feeling alone goes to the root of the matter." Subsequent declarations in *Our Friend the Charlatan* and *Ryecroft* tend to support this view.

But in spite of the fact that *Workers in the Dawn* represents the crude and youthful Gissing, it has, in view of his later work, very considerable interest for the student. It made a rough attempt to contrast the life of ease and the life of poverty; it allowed Gissing to express many of his various immature philosophical thoughts; and it indicated his inability to imagine life in the warm colours of life itself. It was remote from experience; it revealed a writer who was all his life to lack "intimacy," and who

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was all his life to write from the head. Gissing was here, even in his first book, the intellectual novelist, following the plan of George Eliot, endeavouring to frame his characters (as George Eliot framed her characters) instead of imagining them. Here, too, was shown his habit of holding the reader, and drawing his attention by anxious interpretation, like a host, conscious of failure, who steps out over the threshold with his guest, explaining why the evening has been dull. Gissing did not shake off that habit until his best work was done. It even appears in *New Grub Street*. He was too conscious of the defects of his own artistic methods, and too distrustful of the reader's powers of understanding or sympathy, to let the characters explain all. And in the attempt to shape the reader's mind he confessed everything—he confessed that he was writing to the mind, that the characters were mind-created. His attitude was too often: "You might think this rather strange, eh? At any rate inconsistent? Yes, but don't you see that, given the characteristics . . . the mind works in such and such a way?" His early books, about the lower classes, are crowded with such interpolations. In *The Nether World*, for example, we are frequently addressed with such remarks as: "You see that she had formulated her philosophy of life"; "His marriage had implied more gen-

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erosity than you in the upper world can at all appreciate"; "Try to read her mind"; "Knit not your brows against her"; "You will not understand him"; and so on. It was only when his principals took complete hold of him—as they did in *Thyrza*—that the button-holing method, being unnecessary, was cast aside; and then Gissing truly showed his power as a novelist. He was always analytical, scrupulous—in one of his own favourite words, used, surely, in rather a formal sense, intelligent; but it was when he trusted himself and the reader that he could also be subtle and convincing. There is every difference between revelation and exposition.

III

After such a book as *Workers in the Dawn*, which was very lengthy and verbose, and not very successful, it is only natural that there should be a long pause. It was not until four years afterwards that *The Unclassed* made its appearance; and then, with two breaks, followed, in the order named, the other books dealing with the poorer classes—*Demos*, *Thyrza*, and *The Nether World*. These, with *The Town Traveller*, a humorous book published very much later, are the only ones to be dealt with in the present chapter; and it will be seen that *The*

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Town Traveller is inferior in value to the others, since it is intentionally "light," whereas the three books just mentioned contain some of Gissing's most ambitious work. They are, consciously, "social studies," a name generally applied to novels in which an author portrays the life of a class less educated than his own. *Thyrza* shows a freer emotion than any other of Gissing's stories, while *The Nether World*, squalid and sterile though it may seem, deserves high praise as being especially consistent, both in its level of workmanship and in the definite restriction of its scheme to characters sprung from the proletariat.

In all these books—*The Unclassed*, *Demos*, *Thyrza*, and *The Nether World*—there is a great deal of sociological discussion, much of it shrewd, but all showing how purely objective was the writer's knowledge of the poor. He had lived among them, watched the wastage of money and energy, drawn deductions, seen their work, their home life, their recreations; but always with a distaste that suggests almost physical repulsion. He emphasises dirty finger-nails, unwashedness, perspiration. He never suggests for an instant the *humour* of poor people; only in the idyllic characters of *Thyrza* and her sister, who are, after all, the daughters of a school-teacher, does he seem to admit the conscious perception of beauty. In these sisters, and in Jane

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(the "belle fleur" whose presence alone, according to the quotation on the title-page of *The Nether World*, justifies the picture of a dung-hill) are found the spots of tragical purity amid such grim surroundings; but while Thyrza and Lydia are indubitably pathetic, Jane seems to carry with her the same mournful staleness that we feel in Balzac's excessively virtuous young women. The cause is the same in both Jane and the young woman in Balzac—the authors' shamed, rather sentimental disbelief in their own imagined figure; the sense in the reader that the girls are waxen, and seriously uninteresting. In both cases the effect on the reader is physical discomfort, such as he may feel at the sight of little London girls going to a school-treat, with their thin hair still clinging at the temples from the recent special face-washing; an incongruity, a painful cause for averting sentimental eyes from something which, beneath a brilliantly starched dress, may still have a stale little body. With Thyrza and Lydia, that is not the case. They are, in spite of sentimentality, genuinely sad figures, wrought with deep and moving emotion; and in virtue of these two girls, *Thyrza* stands out from among Gissing's early novels as possessing merits quite above those to be found in its predecessors. It is the only book in which the

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author's emotion is free from the fever of exciting occasion.

IV

In *The Unclassed*, Gissing the conscious sociologist and artist begins to express himself. We have several declarations upon Art, such as the one that "Art, nowadays, must be the mouth-piece of misery, for misery is the keynote of modern life." It would be impossible to expect a novelist with such a conviction to write otherwise than cheerlessly; and the book is dark with a sense of much evil. But it is a very marked improvement upon *Workers in the Dawn*. We begin to feel the author's power of grasping character. Sometimes that power wavers, and the minor personages are all at the mercy of "characteristic" speeches laid thoughtfully upon them by Gissing. Also, the contrast between the heroic but *déclassée* Ida Starr and her more cultured rival Maud Enderby is less one of nature than of ideas and breeding. Ida Starr's mother has been a prostitute, and Ida is forced by poverty and brutal seduction into the same path. Her acquaintance with Waymark, the indignant young schoolmaster, proves the turning-point in her life; but he, blind to Ida's love, coquettes with the more intellectual and refined Maud. That Maud, upon the suspicion of an hereditary

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taint, should renounce marriage, allows Waymark a convenient freedom to marry Ida; but it also enables Gissing to shirk all the problems he has raised in the course of the book. Thus the most convincing character in *The Unclassed* is a repulsive and scrofulous girl named Harriet, who lures into marriage her enthusiastic young cousin Julian Casti. She is overdrawn, and ends as a melodramatic figure; but the scenes in which she develops her claims upon Casti's generosity, and her squalid grip upon his person, are given with a horror and an unwilling detail that make them more lasting in the recollection than others of more intrinsic value. Yet even here we recognise some viciousness, as though Gissing had not yet achieved the impersonality that he strove after; and the book is again interesting rather in its promise than its performance. Gissing had assured himself of one thing—that "the artist *ought* to be able to make material of his own sufferings, even while the suffering is still at its height." It was upon a framework of his own sufferings that Gissing reared his best work: when he no longer suffered, the quality of his work deteriorated.

V

During the next few years, Gissing's observation of the poor grew more exact, until it ad-

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vanced, from a vague spiritual shame and anger, through experiences of Clerkenwell Green orators, as exemplified in *Demos*, through humanitarian sentiment, as in *Thyrza*, to the hopelessness of *The Nether World*. Often, in his progress, he almost convinces us of his understanding, only to fall into an exposure of his lack of sympathy with his material. These were perhaps the years in which he tried to realise the idea of a Human Comedy. *The Unclassed* is obviously puny when it is compared with a single work of Balzac. Even *The Nether World*, which appears to be intended to challenge comparison with *Les Parents Pauvres*, lacks both the breadth and the intensity which compels readers breathlessly to continue in the company of *La Cousine Bette* and *Le Cousin Pons*. But the idea is there. Gissing, labouring in his garret or his cellar, living upon pease-pudding, faggots, and bread-and-dripping (though Mr. Harrison says he was long past occasion for this), may in imagination have seen a vast structure composed of novels describing every stratum of English society. In *Demos* there is low life and savage ambition, most fit material for a Balzac; *Thyrza* is entirely English, and often Dickensian; and *The Nether World* is a faithful and patient portrayal of a *milieu* seen without subtlety by this sensitive,

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scrupulous, temperamentally aristocratic man, who forced himself to go into unsavoury alleys holding his nose for the foul reek that he was ready to encounter. *Demos* had its conventionalities and conventions—a wonderful will hid in a church pew, and an idealist lover to satisfy the refinement of the much-tried wife of Richard Mutimer; but both *Thyrza* and *The Nether World* were written with a stern sense of responsibility. By checking their author in the softness of heart which hoped for all to be well in the end, they put a constraint upon him. By compelling him to relinquish idle happiness, constraint put upon Gissing fetters of intolerable weight. It was not perception that made these books unhappy, but hopelessness, because he could not see a way out of the difficulties he had created. We feel him, not as one offering us a poignantly imagined picture with the impersonality of the artist, but as one who has ended his stories ill in obedience to an inverted sentimentality—a shrinking agonised recognition of the inevitability of sorrow. More than any others of his books, *Thyrza* and *The Nether World*, with *New Grub Street*, which is much more heroic, caused Gissing, for all his anxiety to be just, to give the public an excuse for making the constantly heard charge that he “whined.” The seriousness of his endeavour, and what might

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have been supposed the gratefulness of his outlook upon the poor, were as nothing to the public. He was condemned by novel-readers as a writer who whimpered at life. And, in the sense that he regarded his work as being a fair picture, it may be said that he betrayed lack of imagination as well as lack of *savoir vivre*. Although he had seen in his first book that "the majority do not seem unhappy," he could not believe that recreation which he did not approve was genuinely amusing to anybody. He had never been able so far to sink his own standards as to realise that bookishness spells boredom for quite a number of sincere and capable folk. That he could not see anything except bestiality in the recreations of the poor we have ample proof in the painfully biased description (in *The Nether World*) of a bank-holiday jaunt to the Crystal Palace. In these early novels about the poor the majority is always hopelessly sprawling in slime, unwashed (e.g., "Personal uncleanliness made Slimy's proximity at all times unpleasant") and repulsive; while, with few exceptions, the virtuous men are agnostic, book-loving, uncultured idealists, fated to unhappiness and useless life. The public was prepared to agree with him in thinking the poor unpleasant, but when his sensitiveness made the poor also uninteresting, he had robbed them of

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the one chance they had of giving him a power to use in their favour. Other novelists, arriving subsequently, and seeing the possibilities of the lower classes as a picturesque peep-show, displaced Gissing at once, and showed his picture as pitifully false in spirit. They made a "corner" in the poor, filled their books with refined substitutes for lower-class oaths, and by the aid of phonetics gave a subtle appearance of exactitude which was not truly supported by the sensationalism of their thematic material. It was only among the studious, who mistrust missions and district visiting, and who have an incorrigible dislike of approaching the poor nearer than by omnibus rides through the more open slums, that he obtained and kept any authority. Gissing, who denied himself the pleasure of recording a conversation "under fear of being stigmatised as a 'realist' by the critical world," was ousted by men who popularised a strange form of "ultra-realism" and forced people to talk about their books. It was in those days impossible to talk about Gissing's books, except to middle-aged enthusiasts who distrusted democracy, or to literary folk who were more anxious to "place" him in literary history than to discuss his particular virtues as a delineator of social manners. Very few people who read Gissing had; very few even now have the power to see where his books are

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true and where they are astray; very few educated people have lived among the poor for any reason but that of benefiting them or "studying" them. Gissing both lived among the poor and "studied" them; but he lived among them by reason of the most lamentable necessity, and he studied them without ever learning their spiritual language. He was always a stranger, homeless and miserable. Is it any wonder that what he saw was as lugubrious as his own mood?

VI

His generalisations, and the manner in which various points of view are rendered, have always an honourable fairness. He lost his indignation about the poor, and came, in his prose passages—as distinguished from actual description of life—to recognise and to say very intelligent things about them. Various attitudes towards democracy, for example, appear to obtain sincere treatment in *Demos*, a most interestingly conceived book ruined by melodramatic incidents and feminine ferocity, as well as by the caving-in of Gissing's elaborate attempt to suggest the failure of a model manufacturing community. The idea was that a rich manufacturer, dying suddenly, left no will. Accordingly his wealth, instead of passing to the man for whom it was intended, fell into a lower-class London

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family, of which the head, Richard Mutimer, was a Socialist. Mutimer, shrewdly recognising some of his shortcomings, but determined to put into execution his ideas for the betterment of working-class conditions, saw at the same time an opportunity of immense self-aggrandisement. He started his model community, discarded his old love, and married a refined girl whose love was really given elsewhere. The discovery of the will by Mutimer's wife as she sat in the family church-pew reduced them once again to poverty; and Mutimer's later endeavours to make money and interestedly to benefit the poor resulted in such disaster that he was killed by an angry mob.

Here was an ambitious subject. Unfortunately the will episode, besides being novelettish in treatment, was very obvious. So, too, was the machinery by which Mutimer obtained his refined wife, a young woman who, until late in the book, followed convention in an unexceptionable way. In fact, all the portions dealing with people belonging to a superior class were written without pretence of freshness. The discarded working-girl bride, intended as a noble figure of restraint and simplicity, became merely mawkish. Mutimer himself, seen with fair consistency, yet needed too much of the author's explanatory method to be firmly individual, be-

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cause the young author who seeks to impose character by interpretation always muffles the figure and reveals his own weakness. The wicked persons of the story, whose schemes for making money by evil means are very vaguely realised, have an exaggerated villainy, due to the author's inexperience of their craft. But the scenes describing the Mutimer family, and the entire portrayal of old Mrs. Mutimer, are sure and good. Old Mrs. Mutimer is one of the best character-studies of the poor to be found either in Gissing's books or outside them. Her distrust of the newly acquired wealth, her loyalty to Mutimer's discarded sweetheart, her discomfort in any home but the one to which she is accustomed, her demand to be allowed to do her own housework—all these things are well seen and felt. They have none of the amused tolerance of the conventional novelist; they are all shown with perfect delicacy and grace; and they are never sentimental. The figure of Mrs. Mutimer was, whatever Gissing might have thought of such a description, admirably realistic. It is the brightest spot so far to be seen in Gissing's novels about the poor.

VII

When we come to *Thyrza*, which I regard as one of Gissing's best books, we shall see that

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while Thyrza herself is idealised into an almost ethereal person, her sister Lydia is revealed with a sympathy and restraint which is more than commendable. There is, for the first time, an extraordinary subtlety in the method employed. Almost without having our attention drawn to the fact, we are made to realise not only the essential difference between the sisters, but also the attitude towards each of them of every other person in the book. I may perhaps be allowed to give a very bald summary of *Thyrza*, which will serve as a basis for further comment.

At Ullswater live Mr. Newthorpe, a fairly well-off man with a great interest in books, and his motherless daughter Annabel. They discuss Walter Egremont, a young, well-educated idealist, son of an oil-cloth manufacturer of Lambeth. Egremont, to their surprise, appears suddenly at the house, and takes occasion to propose to Annabel. She, however, does not love him, though she encourages his scheme to help the working-men of Lambeth to a sense of the value of culture. He accordingly returns to Lambeth, and prepares to accomplish his task by means of lectures.

Among the men who attend his first lecture are two, Gilbert Grail and Luke Ackroyd, who are very different in temperament. Grail is a man of thirty-five, a worker in a candle factory,

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and very bookish. Ackroyd, on the other hand, is much interested in Practical Science. He does not continue to attend the lectures. But he is in love with Thyrza Norman, a beautiful and strange girl who lives, with her elder sister Lydia, in the same house as Gilbert Grail. The two girls are employed in making linings for hats. When Thyrza will have nothing to do with him, Ackroyd consorts with Totty Nancarrow, a good but harum-scarum girl, and then goes steadily to the bad. In the same house as Totty lives an atheistical workman, named Bunce, who also attends Egremont's lectures. It is Bunce's sickly daughter who goes at times to stay at a home for poor children kept in Eastbourne by a widowed friend of Egremont's named Mrs. Ormonde. Thyrza makes Mrs. Ormonde's acquaintance through the agency of Bunce's daughter, whom she once accompanies to Eastbourne.

Egremont, meanwhile, continues to busy himself with lectures and other plans for benefiting altruistically the working-men of Lambeth. He is steadily made to feel that his plans are tending towards failure; but he has made a friend of Grail, a thoroughly good sort of man and one of a kind for whom Gissing has a partiality. It is the friendship for Grail that brings Egremont into malignant disfavour with a man called

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Bower, a pompous and ambitious person whose place in the book is simply that of a property.

At length Egremont's plans define themselves into a scheme for the establishment of a free library and reading-room. He invites Grail to act as librarian; and Grail at this point asks Thyrza to marry him. She admires Grail so much that she consents. From this comes the first meeting of Thyrza with Egremont, for she cannot resist going alone to see the house in which the library is to make its start. Egremont is there, unpacking books. He is fascinated by her wonderful beauty, allows her to help in arranging the books, and then asks her to keep the fact of the books being there at all a secret from Grail, for whom he intends their presence to be a post-nuptial surprise. This involves for Thyrza the suppression of the fact that she has seen him, and she goes twice more, uncontrollably, the victim of intense love. But she is seen coming out of the house by Bower, who also sees Egremont, and spreads a scandal. Thyrza, finding that Egremont does not keep a further appointment, speaks to him piteously in the street. Egremont, loving her, and wishing not to be traitorous to Grail, repulses Thyrza, and abruptly leaves England, first for Jersey, and then for a more distant place. Thyrza runs away from home. Everybody thinks they must

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be together. Mrs. Ormonde writes to Egremont in Jersey, and the letter is returned; Grail goes to Jersey, but finds Egremont gone. At last Thyrza reappears in a Caledonian Road eating-house, where she falls very ill; and as an old envelope with Mrs. Ormonde's address on it is found in her pocket by the keeper of the eating-house, Mrs. Ormonde is the one summoned to her assistance.

Mrs. Ormonde tends Thyrza and takes her to Eastbourne secretly. Egremont returns to London, has an interview with the distracted Grail, clears himself, and promises to try and find Thyrza. At last he goes to Mrs. Ormonde's house at Eastbourne, where he learns that the girl is safe, and Thyrza overhears a conversation between Mrs. Ormonde and Egremont in which his love for herself is disclosed. In this talk, so strangely overheard, it is arranged that Egremont shall go to America for two years. If his love is the same at the end of that time Mrs. Ormonde will not attempt to stop a marriage which at present she regards as impossible. Thyrza is so buoyed up by the secret discovery that Egremont loves her that she submits unprotestingly to all that is proposed for her own future. She returns to London, under Mrs. Ormonde's direction, and is given singing lessons to develop her beautiful voice. For two

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years she works tremendously. When the time is up, she expects Egremont. He does not come to her. He leaves America with the intention of seeking her out, and goes straight to Mrs. Ormonde for her address. But Mrs. Ormonde has several things in mind. She thinks Annabel Newthorpe now loves Egremont (as indeed she does), and that he would be happier with Annabel. And, not knowing that Thyrza has overheard the old talk, she tells Egremont that Thyrza has seemed perfectly cheerful and happy in his absence. This conveys to him the impression that Thyrza's love has faded, even as his own has a little done. He knows that Thyrza's presence would soon make his love bright again, yet upon Mrs. Ormonde's advice, he does not go to Thyrza, but North, to the Newthorpes. Thyrza waits broken-hearted. At last she comes passionately to Eastbourne, to learn from the penitent Mrs. Ormonde of the mistake that has been made. She is really in despair, but she goes back to London, offers to marry Grail, hears that Lydia is to marry Ackroyd, even as Totty Nancarrow is to marry Bunce, the widower; and then dies. Egremont and Annabel finally arrange a marriage based on esteem and sympathy, but without pretence of a passion which neither any longer feels.

The outline of any story, when bereft of the

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imagining which alone can interweave its main strands, is bound to falsify its values. In *Thyrza* this is particularly the case, because while the author's manner is formal, and liable to "date" the book, the writing shows much deep feeling, which it is impossible to suggest clearly. But in every way, even in the presentment of the people among whom the lives of the principal characters are spent, the book has a sympathy and a distinctiveness that give it actual value. There is no melodrama, and the various parts are much more interdependent than ever before. The weakest scenes are those in which Mrs. Ormonde appears; but even in these there is a successful attempt to show the distance between an educated woman and the most beautiful and sensitive girl of a lower class. Mrs. Ormonde's failure of sympathy is well rendered; her adherence to personal standards, rather than to individual justice, is strictly feminine and characteristic. And the book has a certain emotional momentum. For the only time in Gissing's lower-class studies we take an active, and not a purely intellectual, interest in the welfare of the persons engaged. This is such a very marked advance for Gissing that it seems to place *Thyrza* easily first among the books of this order, supposing we look first, as we should, for emotion in any work of the

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imagination. To move by legitimate means is the aim of even the most realistic novelist.

VIII

There is one point about *Thyrza* that is worth discussing at some length. It will be remarked that the machinery of the book involves the reaction of members of one class, the moneyed and cultured class, upon another. We may see in many English novels of first-rate importance—such as those of Mr. Thomas Hardy—that this is regarded as a permissible thing, just as it no doubt is, from a popular point of view, a desirable thing. But this interaction does in some respects tend to rob the book of singleness of impression. It makes for variety, and, as we have already seen in *Demos*, it may sometimes serve as a very admirable method of drawing forth particular reserves of personality which otherwise would remain latent. But in a book like *Thyrza* it is arbitrary and accidental, although, in directing attention to the point of inter-class marriage, Gissing may be supposed to have used the device with effect. Moreover, the personal tragedy of *Thyrza* herself is accomplished by this means. But the personal tragedy of *Thyrza* lies in her lack of accord with her environment. It may quite well be argued

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that such a matter is beside the point in reference to Gissing's story, since criticism of this sort might idly be advanced against any story of a personal tragedy. It is, in effect, a calling in question of any author's inventiveness. Gissing conceived the story as it is written, and there the problem might be left. Thyrza is balked of her idea of happiness by the fateful interposition of a well-intentioned lady. That is quite true; but the question of whether Thyrza and Egremont, married, might have been happy does not arise out of the book as written. The book is, in large measure, occupied in raising the doubt as to whether Thyrza might have achieved her destiny in marrying Grail, a man of her own class. That being so, why drag in Egremont? My suggestion is, that while the mutual affection of Thyrza and Egremont is romantically possible, a story equally well revealing the subtle tragedy of Thyrza's place in her own social order might have been made without bringing about the intrusion of Egremont into Lambeth domestic history. It would possibly have been more true to what Gissing (quoting Lamb) called "*the quiddity of common objects*" if Thyrza had been allowed to find the tragedy of her soul without quitting her own environment. Most real people work out their lives in a single environment. To introduce an alien element is certainly to add

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to the variety of the material; but it surely detracts from the substantial accuracy of a social picture, and it makes the author less reliant upon the richness of the material which is to be found in the normal lives of human beings. *Thyrza* is thus an example of what I have called Gissing's inverted sentimentality. Many novels and novellettes have been written round a poor heroine who, by the excellence of her personal qualities, has transcended the conditions of her environment. The fact does not make *Thyrza* less interesting and even valuable as an emotional picture; but in the sense that the book conforms more or less to a convention, however sincerely the conventional solution may have been disregarded, the facts do suggest that *Thyrza*, by its leap out of common experience, becomes less notable than it might otherwise have been.

IX

Some such idea as the one which has been suggested may account for the nature of Gissing's next social novel. In *The Nether World* the truths of environment are strictly observed. Except that it turns upon the unexpected wealth of a working-class man, and his wish to use this money for the relief of poor people in general, the story is self-supporting. It is easily the

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ugliest of Gissing's books, in spite of the character of Jane, who is the granddaughter of the rich old man; but it is consistent and deserving of respect.

The story shows how Sidney Kirkwood, loving an original girl—Clara Hewett—yet drives her by his love to an extreme of vanity and destruction. That he later loves Jane Snowdon is little to the point, since morbid scruples prevent him from accepting the girl with her grandfather's legacy and its consequent duties. His final marriage with Clara, whose face has been partially destroyed by vitriol thrown in jealousy by a rival actress, is full of unhappy duty; and the end of the book shows him meeting Jane, who has been despoiled of her legacy by an unscrupulous father, over the grave of the old man, her grandfather. Other interest is supplied, or should be supplied, by the rascally Amazon, Clem Peckover, married to and deserted by Jane's father; by the exploits of Bob Hewett, who is led by a vanity similar to his sister's into the manufacture of base coin; and by Bob's indescribably squalid wife, Pennyloaf Candy.

Although as a novel its strength is dissipated by the absence of any clearly defined theme, the quality of the book, judged as a series of chapters, is very high. The characters are finely differentiated, and if that were the sole aim of

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the novelist it would be achieved here. Penny-loaf Candy, for example, is admirably studied. She is based upon first-hand observation. What the book lacks is that difficult thing, light. It is patient and well reasoned; it is convincing; it simply lacks movement and fire. Whether it is that the characters have no intrinsic interest, or whether, in its attempt to give such a picture of the poor as Balzac gives of the French peasantry, or of such persons as La Cibot, in *Le Cousin Pons*, it loses original impulse, it is hard to say. Possibly the chief difficulty arises from the fact that Gissing had not thoroughly fathomed that curious humour, and even joy, that prevents the poorest people from losing heart. It is an impossible thing for some people to understand. He was himself revolted by squalor, poor food, noise. He feared poverty. Those who are used to poverty, to noise, to dirt, to much that is evil and tasteless, no longer regard these things. The English poor make jokes until they are dying, and when they are dying. That, Gissing could have understood and admired. What he could not understand or admire was that they make jokes while they are living. They make jokes about dirt and about hunger. If one is going to write sympathetically of them one must not be too fastidious. That was the mistake Gissing made. He never could understand the

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mind of the proletarian. When he tries to suggest its natural working he fails. Take this as an example of his insight, as well as of his habit of so justifying his portraits by explanation as to betray their intellectual origin:—

Genuine respect for law is the result of possessing something which the law exerts itself to guard. Should it happen that you possess nothing, and that your education in metaphysics has been grievously neglected, the strong probability is that your mind will reduce the principle of society to its naked formula: Get, by whatever means, so long as with impunity. On that formula Bob Hewett was brooding; in the hours of this Saturday evening he exerted his mind more strenuously than ever before in the course of his life. And to a foregone result. Here is a man with no moral convictions, with no conscious relations to society, save those which are hostile, with no personal affections; at the same time, vaguely aware of certain faculties in himself for which life affords no scope and encouraged in various kinds of conceit by the crass stupidity of all with whom he associated. It is suggested to him all at once that there is a very easy way of improving his circumstances, and that by exercise of a certain craft with which he is perfectly familiar; only, the method happens to be criminal. "Men who do this kind of thing are constantly being caught and severely punished. Yes; men of a certain kind; not Robert Hewett. Robert Hewett is altogether an exceptional being; he is head and shoulders above the men with whom he mixes; he is clever, he is remarkably good-looking. If anyone in this world, of a truth Robert Hewett may reckon on impunity when he sets his wits against the law. Why, his arrest and punishment is an altogether inconceivable thing; he never in his life had a charge brought against him."

Again and again it came back to that. Every novice in unimpassioned crime has that thought, and the more self-conscious the man, the more impressed with a sense of his own importance, so much the weightier is its effect with him.

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We know in what spirit John Hewett regarded rebels against the law. Do not imagine that any impulse of that nature actuated his son. . . . Bob's temperament was, in a certain measure, that of the artist; he felt without reasoning, he let himself go whither his moods propelled him. Not a man of evil propensities; entertain no such thought for a moment. . . . Weakness, vanity, a sense that he has not satisfactions proportionate to his desert, a strong temptation—here are the data which, in ordinary cases, explain a man's deliberate attempt to profit by criminality.

X

The Town Traveller, a short, mildly hilarious novel belonging to a much later period, deals with the lower middle-class, excepting that the plot hangs upon the tracking of a bigamous earl. There are a good many references to perspiration, and the author's attitude throughout is genially condescending, since he is writing for cultured people an amusing story about an uncultured order. Mr. Gammon and Polly Sparks are, however, shown in their meanness with good humour, and although the book is very faintly vulgar in its attempt to reproduce the manners of vulgar society, it would be tolerable as coming from a less conscientious writer than Gissing.

This is the last book in which the interest is chiefly one of class. Most of Gissing's other stories, although many of them deal directly with the subject of class, do so by means of individuals, and not of a section of life. Class and the

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sense of class is the groundwork of such books as *Born in Exile*, *In the Year of Jubilee*, *The Paying Guest*, and *Will Warburton*; but one of these books is practically a short story, while in the other three the main interest is entirely personal. As I have suggested, it is in the studies of temperament that Gissing's most notable work is to be found; but although I have taken occasion to assert his shortcomings as a delineator of lower-class manners, it does very decidedly stand to Gissing's credit that at a time when most modern novelists, with the exception of Mr. Hardy and, in one novel, George Meredith, were finding inspiration in the middle and upper classes, he should have had the courage to strike below the pleasant surface of life. The comparison between Gissing and "Mark Rutherford," made by Mr. Thomas Seccombe, is suggestive; but in the work of Mr. Hale White there is an essential tranquillity which endears it to quiet minds, rather than the nervous, irritable, and passionate sense of writhing life which we may find in Gissing's work. That Gissing was, as Mr. Seccombe says, influenced by the "cumbersome and grandiose paraphernalia" of the Victorian novelists is also profoundly true. Gissing was caught midway between the two schools—the Victorian and the modern. His early books are thus robbed of the freshness which they

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might have had in virtue of the author's youth. What they possess of maturity is too often purchased by the sacrifice of spontaneity; while the dogged "objectivity" which one may trace to the more solid Victorian novels is an artistic blemish which crushes the spiritual understanding revealed later by Gissing. When we realise, from a reference in his third book, that Gissing was acquainted with the extraordinarily pure method of Turgenev, we cannot help wondering whether, if the persistent hold of the English middle-class objective novelists had been less firm, Gissing might earlier have reached a true spiritual maturity, and thus realised the promise of his own native talent.

III

STUDIES OF TEMPERAMENT

I

ONE of the characters in *New Grub Street* observes: "The best moments of life are those when we contemplate beauty in the purely artistic spirit—objectively. I have had such moments in Greece and Italy; times when I was a free spirit, utterly remote from the temptations and harassings of sexual emotion. What we call love is mere turmoil." Apart from the implied definition of Art as purely objective, and apart also from the curious suggestion of the attitude of one who contemplates beauty, the insistence upon the turmoil of "what we call love" is particularly interesting. It strikes the key-note of Gissing's novels of temperament. The lover passes nights "of the wretchedest indecision" and is so invariably cat-like in his prowlings and miseries, as to show very clearly how wasting and unsatisfactory the love of woman may be. Jealousy is the dominant note in a Gissing lover; jealousy in one form or another runs through all the novels. In

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The Unclassed Harriet is malignant with jealousy; in *Isabel Clarendon* Kingcote spends his time in a frenzy of distrust; in *A Life's Morning* suspicions are ever ready in Wilfrid Athel's mind; in *The Emancipated* Miriam spies and betrays; in *New Grub Street* Reardon's jealousy of Milvain is hinted; in *Denzil Quarrier* Eustace Glazzard's jealousy of Denzil leads him into incredible breach of confidence; in *Born in Exile* Marcella's jealousy is magnificently indicated; in *The Odd Women* Widdowson is jealousy personified, though he tells himself that jealous husbands, according to something that he has read, end in making their wives provide just cause for jealousy, as indeed is the case here; in *The Year of Jubilee* there are several jealousies; in *Eve's Ransom* the hero's thoughts of his beloved, notably well rendered, are base and frigid; in *The Whirlpool* jealousy and intrigue are the basis of the story; in *Veranilda* Marcian provides an interesting study of a jealous Roman; in *The Crown of Life*, *Our Friend the Charlatan*, and *Will Warburton* the atmosphere surrounding the various lovers is charged with jealousy and fever. It is impossible to doubt that Gissing's conviction is deep and sure; the turmoil of love is persistently emphasised throughout. If, as is said in *The Crown of Life*, love "is the personal experience of the very few," the fact

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will help us to realise that these books of Gissing's are all studies of *abnormal* temperament; and, as realism is largely concerned with normality, Gissing's studies are in no way to be regarded (as they have been regarded) as realistic. He throws off in *The Emancipated* a further remark which puts his conviction in another way. "It is doubtful whether anyone who loves passionately fulfils the ideal of being able to see the object of love in any but a noble light; this is one of the many conventions, chiefly of literary origin, which to the eyes of the general make cynicism of wholesome truth." Such perception as this gives a touch of squalor to the novels of temperament, but it seems also to give these books an intimate concern with a narrowly restricted circle of individuals. In such studies, which are really subjective, and not objective, Gissing reveals his fine quality as a romantic historian of life.

Subjectivity and objectivity, about which he appears to have held strong views, have aroused much jugglement in the minds of those sophisticated persons who frame artistic theories; but the need of both in the equipment of a novelist was never more clearly shown than in Gissing's case. The imperfect fusion of the two, the extraordinary notion (surely betraying lack of imagination) that one apprehends natural

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beauty objectively, hampered him throughout; but in the studies of lovers, unwelcome and painful though we may sometimes find them, the fusion was achieved. The whole cause of Gissing's artistic perplexity was the objectivity of the Victorians and the misunderstanding in his time of the word "detachment." He thought, I think, that to be impersonal was to be objective, and as he was very nearly unable to escape from himself and his own preoccupations, he fought a losing fight all through his literary life. This perhaps explains why, in considering his work, we so often, after passages of real imagining and power, are brought fiercely up against some piece of false, hard, and shallow psychology. We do not suffer in this way in the studies of jealousy, because although they tend, as a whole, to be monotonous through essential similarity, they are freshly and vividly produced from Gissing's own consciousness.

II

It would not be true to say, however, that Gissing was obsessed by the idea of jealousy, for the main themes of his books, from *A Life's Morning* onwards, are intimately woven and increasingly involved with some "problem." Marriage, the position of woman, class, education, the rela-

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tion of husband and wife—these things perpetually occupied his mind. *Isabel Clarendon* is almost an exceedingly subtle study of an abortive love affair between a comfort and society-loving woman and a young recluse. *New Grub Street* is an extraordinarily fine and richly characterised study of professional literary life. *The Emancipated*, apart from its confused hovering around the defiance of convention by conventional people, is a penetrating analysis of an unhappy marriage. In these books that I have named, life, no less than love, is shown as turmoil, terribly complicated by material needs; in *The Whirlpool*, Gissing, always morbidly concerned with the tendencies of his own work, finally claims that life as it is lived in the world is nothing but a vast, agitated, and soul-destroying turmoil of ambitions and occupations. It first tears men and women from the simple pleasures by which their natures would be enriched, and then leads irresistibly to failure and despair. He says, elsewhere, that he is *afraid* of the world, so much afraid as to be useless—a most significant admission, not lightly to be passed when it comes from one who makes the world his province. If we compare such an attitude with that of a supreme novelist of our time, Mr. Arnold Bennett, who is continually, as he expresses it, “savouring” life, we shall see how

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little of the modern spirit of eager inquiry into phenomena Gissing possessed. He was, according to Mr. Morley Roberts, "an inverted idealist. He looks back. It is the more hopeless, the more *impossibly* vain." The sense of life as a maelstrom, resistless and inexorable, is Gissing's bugbear; failure, grief, inability to struggle against odds, sad handicaps of temperament, endless compromise with the idea of happiness—again and again we find him expressing these things, until his world seems peopled only by satisfied vulgarians and those to whom social intercourse is abhorrent. And while these pre-occupations rob his work of resilience and warmth, they do at the same time lend it an uncomfortable distinction. He was a conscious malcontent, not a revolutionary, because he was just as much a social as a religious agnostic; but repelled by the superficial ugliness of active existence. He was all the time trying sincerely to express, in terms of art and morality, his own sedentary notion of life, the notion of an educated and sensitive student (never a mystic), consciously out of place—"There have always been two entities—myself and the world, and the normal relation between these two has been hostile." Assuredly, however artistic it may be to express sincerely one's deep conviction about life, it is ill to choose the most popular form of

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art to deplore in set terms the decay of the art of living. By his own definition of Art, Gissing was condemned to eternal judgment in terms of morality, which is the worst thing that can befall an artist. "Art," he says, may be defined as "an expression, satisfying and abiding, of the zest of life." Never the zest of life did Gissing portray, but admirably the fever.

III

Isabel Clarendon, *A Life's Morning*, and *The Emancipated*, Gissing's first three novels of temperament, all show imitativeness and inequalities; but of the three, by reason of its being the most deeply imagined, the earliest is the most vivid. All of the three books have been difficult to obtain until the cheap re-issue of *A Life's Morning* in 1914; and I think the loss has been the greatest in the case of *Isabel Clarendon*. I wish some publisher interested in Gissing's work would undertake a new edition of this book. Although perhaps it hardly merits Mr. Morley Roberts's loyal comparisons with the masterpieces of Turgenev, *Isabel Clarendon* derives great interest from the intensity with which the author shows Kingcote's passion for Isabel. In those passages which rise to heights of eloquent emotion there is genuine first-hand feeling.

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When Kingcote, torn already by his sense of poverty, is doubly tantalised by a jealous perception of Isabel's temperamental failings, Gissing's insight is subtle and convincing. The two have sworn mutual affection, yet Isabel cannot resist the allurements of society: she is the child of gaiety, genuinely loving, yet wedded already to her natural environment. When Kingcote goes to see her he finds Isabel surrounded by friends, and he is too sensitive and too egoistic to adapt himself to such a life as the one that is necessary to her. Jealousy grows within him; he charges Isabel wildly with betrayal of his love; he repents as fiercely, and again and again wavers between railing and apology. Isabel offers to return home to the country if he will only *insist* upon it; but he has not the strength of character to insist on anything. He wears himself out with jealousy, and a little exhausts her by his demands, although her love is splendidly steadfast. Finally, to his agony, he sees her in the distance talking to a man who obviously supplicates, while she appears to listen not unkindly. Kingcote, infuriated with passion, becomes at this time really insane; and although he is found, desperately ill, and slowly restored to life, he crushes every thought of Isabel from his mind and rejects her generous overtures. That her own love, after its one rapturous blooming,

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should fade, is natural and convincing; less so is the author's hint on the last page that Kingcote's maturer and more staid affections are to be elsewhere bestowed.

The book is too fervid to prelude supreme works of art in a similar key, for the emotion, though intense, is febrile rather than abiding—headlong, unbalanced, the sudden sweeping gust of an overstrained sensibility. The comparison with Turgenev, eager and in every way creditable to the friend who made it, only serves to emphasise the exceeding depth and subtlety of the Russian author's power of emotional analysis. *Isabel Clarendon* will not bear such a comparison. It remains interesting, nevertheless, as giving us a picture of Gissing in his progress to independence, and in this respect it possesses exceptional value for those truly inspired to read Gissing in all his moods.

Isabel Clarendon belongs to his imitative work, as does *A Life's Morning*, which, after a fascinating start, trails off into sensationalism and perfunctory development of intrigue. The Meredithian portions of the story do not combine well with those dealing with events in Dunfield, and the writing is sometimes self-conscious and even bad. We read such passages as the following:—

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Education she did get, by hook or by crook; there was dire pinch to pay for it, and, too well knowing this, the child strove her utmost to use the opportunities offered her. Each morning going into Dunfield, taking with her some sandwiches that were called dinner, walking home again by tea-time, tired, hungry—ah, hungry! . . . In winter you saw her set forth with her waterproof and umbrella, the too-heavy bag of books on her arm; sometimes the wind and rain beating as if to delay her—they, too, cruel. In summer the hot days tired her perhaps still more; she reached home in the afternoon well-nigh fainting, the books were so heavy. Who would not have felt kindly to her? So gentle she was, so dreadfully shy and timid, her eyes so eager, so full of unconscious pathos. . . . A little thing that happened one day—take it as an anecdote. . . .

The anecdote which follows is quite as sentimental as might be expected from such an induction. The story itself tells how Wilfrid Athel, a young student, falls in love with a governess. Family pressure only makes him obdurate; but Emily Hood takes her own course, after the death of her father and mother, by disappearing. Whereupon Wilfrid goes in for politics and presently becomes engaged to a sanguine beauty, named Beatrice Redwing. She, in time, discovers that while Wilfrid pretends to love her, and while indeed he thinks he loves, he yet keeps Emily's letters as something entirely sacred. A meeting between himself and Emily reveals to both that their love is intact; and Beatrice heroically immolates herself. The sensational portions of the story, which form a sub-plot, refer

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to Emily Hood's father and his employer, a lay-figure of a passionate brute. This man desires to marry Emily, puts temptation in her father's way, and after first trying to use his knowledge of old Hood's fall as a way to Emily's hand, drives the unfortunate father to suicide. These episodes are both unpleasant and unconvincing.

The Emancipated, which is not a very bold book, has been unduly scorned by one or two critics. It is true that the story is tentative, that there are poor things in it, and that the Italian backgrounds are scanty; but the book has points. It describes the sudden marriage of an intelligent girl with an intellectual philanderer, a sort of charlatan: and her gradual disillusion. There is much more in the book than that, much talk of something rather timid which goes by the name of emancipation, and which consists in revolt against "the domestic point of view"; but this cannot be regarded as being very definitely considered.

Yet it would be unfair to suggest that *The Emancipated*, with all its pallor, lacks subtlety, for it is full of it. The subtlety is pressed, is argued, and thereby loses some of its effect; but it is present, and it cannot be ignored. Here, as elsewhere, Gissing forced his own version of affairs to the front. He could not allow the story to tell itself—his experience was not consider-

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able enough to keep him from disquisition or exposition. The book was water-logged from the outset by his inexperience; and the minor personages are grotesquely over-explained. If we compare it with an early book by Mr. Henry James, say *The Portrait of a Lady*, we cannot fail to see how unfortunately *The Emancipated* bears scrutiny in its own school; but the standard set is a high one, and the difficulties of this sort of writing are enormous. The study of Elgar has both character and perception. It is, I think, one of the best of Gissing's experiments in an unsympathetic type. Elgar, compared with Lashmar, in *Our Friend the Charlatan*, has all the advantage which an imagined person must have over one that has been invented. There is, curiously enough, much more cynicism in *The Emancipated* than in any other of Gissing's books; the beloved Italian scenes are unhappily made settings for base intrigue and "the harassings of sexual emotion."

IV

Although the next three years saw also the short and inferior novel *Denzil Quarrier*, they marked the highest point of Gissing's achievement. Only a novelist with very unusual gifts could have produced so rapidly three such notable books as *New Grub Street* (1891), *Born*

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in Exile (1892), and *The Odd Women* (1893). The two first are assuredly very fine novels indeed; and present a striking contrast when we realise that while *New Grub Street* is packed with individuals (much better imagined than elsewhere), *Born in Exile* is a remarkably close, and even copious, study of a small number of unusual people. In both books, of course, there are failures: the minor personages in *Born in Exile* are stereotyped and uninteresting, obvious makeshifts. Mrs. Jacox is a perpetual vocative; Chilvers is as much a parody as any other clergyman in Gissing's books; Malkin, besides being an echo of Whelpdale, in *New Grub Street*, is also a type. But on the whole these two books contain work that demands not merely praise, but admiration. *New Grub Street* is for the first time a book based absolutely on Gissing's personal knowledge of life and living people. Where he has been hitherto a spectator of the classes he has described, he is now writing from experience. The characters are made either from parts of his own life—witness Reardon's struggles, Biffen's occupations and food-stuffs, Whelpdale's American experiences; or from people he has seen and known in the British Museum reading-room. The book is convincing as a picture of individuals and, more largely, it is convincing as a picture of a section of life.

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The main idea of *New Grub Street* is the contrast between two types of literary man. Jasper Milvain, a determined young writer with an eye to the main chance, gaily progresses through popular journalism and through a discredibly handled love affair to complete material success. Edwin Reardon, on the other hand, a novelist of serious intentions, loses power by ill-health and anxiety, loses the company (and almost the affection) of his wife, and finally loses the strength to resist illness. The cynical conclusion, which shows Jasper securing posthumous fame for Reardon and marrying Reardon's widow, is in keeping with the book. In addition to these parallel lines, which are most delicately and wisely drawn so as to be not too insistent, there are the internal affairs of three families—the Reardons, the Milvains, and the Yules—which are given in each case with sureness and with proper relation to the rest of the story. Thus the book is well balanced and sane; and while it lacks just that imaginative power which would have made it a great novel—even according to the author's technical ideas, which were old-fashioned—it remains the best picture of middle-class literary life that has been written in English. In every way it is an advance on Gissing's earlier work. It belongs, of course, to the early nineties, a fact which is emphasised

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unduly by the typography of the current edition; but it is a deliberately planned and conscientiously executed work of art which will never lose its value as a moving revelation of the conditions of life. By its very "shoppishness" it enables Gissing's purely literary humour (too often that self-conscious irony that degenerates into sarcasm) to have freer play than we shall discover anywhere else in his work. And all the thought which he had given to his own work and to the work of his contemporaries appears in *New Grub Street*, never, it is true, "direct and flaming from the heart of man," but restrained and reflective to the point of provoking admiration from all who can appreciate the virtues of restraint and thought. In fact, all Gissing's virtues as a writer have their opportunity of display in this book. Minor faults are to be found in Little Willy, the property child of Reardon; in the legacies, which, although carefully "laid," are really a device, and interfere with the scrupulous reader's sense of probability; and I think Jasper's proposal to the rich young woman who rejects him is an extravagance which, being serious, is offensive. In his desire to be particular, moreover, Gissing makes a man on one page a law-stationer and on another a dentist; but this is a detail hardly worth mentioning. We read *New Grub Street* with all the apprehensiveness

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that we accord to Gissing's minor works, but with none of the discomfort. It is a true attempt to show human beings working through life; and we feel that each character has a definite and logical past, rooted in profound probability.

The question of three volumes against one is clearly examined; the commonplace of the reviewers of that time, that the novelist's first duty is "to tell a story," is not unfairly satirised; the mental pabulum of the quarter-educated is seriously discussed; the ethics of reviewing are canvassed by so patent an authority as Milvain; the various points that arise in the life of any seriously intentioned writer are steadily and convincingly illustrated; in a thousand ways the influences at work on such widely differing writers as Reardon, Milvain, and Alfred Yule are brought home to one. Reardon, the novelist who has run through his ideas, and who is so fastidious and so exhausted that he fiddles first with this plan and then with the other; Milvain, the journalist who writes what will sell and who recognises that nowadays a man reaches literary success through society, instead of reaching society through literary success; Yule, the arrogant hack whose ambitions take no account of changed taste, and whose matrimonial misalliance is eternally a vision of intellectual failure—these are the work of no common man, but of one who has

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seen and suffered in what he calls "the valley of the shadow of books." There is a magnificently clever picture of the British Museum reading-room, warmed as it is for the shambling decrepitude of octogenarian insomniacs. Especially good are the relations of Reardon and Amy, the wife who "can't bear poverty," and who has assured her husband in early days that his is "the kind of face that people come to know in portraits." The way in which their natural love is undermined by misunderstanding is shown with a minimum of explanation (for Gissing); and so is Amy's comparison of her husband with the successful Milvain, although this is a little over-argued. Biffen, who, for sufficient reasons, will not remove his overcoat on a warm evening, and who eats bread-and-dripping with a knife and fork because it "seemed to make the fare more substantial," who philosophically plans and writes a novel called *Mr. Bailey: Grocer*, which is about the "ignobly decent," is a pathetic and real figure who never loses nobility. Marian Yule, the girl so unpleasantly jilted by Milvain, is a good contrast to Amy Reardon, and reveals herself in touching loyalty, without over-anxiety on the part of the author. Even Reardon, who is not allowed to reach the reader without apostrophic comment ("But try to imagine a personality," etc.), is drawn with a sureness gen-

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erally lacking in self-portraits. His love for Amy is shown in many ways, even in those where "the stress of injured love is always tempted to speech which seems its contradiction"; and the double pulling of the married but unsympathetic lovers is a companion-picture to that one which has been described in *Isabel Clarendon*, where two opposed temperaments in disorder are revealed with understanding. Certain minor personages, such as Mr. and Mrs. Carter, Mrs. Edmund Yule, and John Yule, are lacking in vitality; and the book begins to show, even in twenty years, a slight staleness; but on the whole it is rich in genuine characterisation to an extent unusual with Gissing. There are very few of those unhappy attempts, which disfigure others of his novels, to improvise a man or woman with a set way of speaking, and to beat them into a dull sort of stupid relation to the book. It leaves on the mind the impression it was intended to make; and it has an original and personal value as a novel which deserves to be read and remembered on its own account. No book which lacks beauty can be expected to do more than that.

V

With the minor characters of *Born in Exile* I have already dealt. The novel itself, however,

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transcends the imperfections, technical or spiritual, of its minor characters. It is much more pretentious than *New Grub Street*, because it attempts to give a full-length picture of a man of considerable but perverted talent, who is hampered throughout his life by exclusion from the society to which he aspires.

Godwin Peak, the son of poor parents, early shows unusual intellectual powers, and is enabled, by the kindness of the founder, to benefit by increased education at Whitelaw College (by which name Gissing is supposed to represent Owens College, where he received part of his own tuition). His abrupt changes of study, and his final relinquishment of his immediate ambition, enforced by the thoughtless efforts of a restaurant-keeping uncle, are detailed. Later we find him in London with huge and hungry social ambitions. In those years he has decided, a plebeian himself, to marry a lady. Chance leads him to an acquaintance, in Exeter, with Sidwell Warricombe, a young and beautiful girl, for whom he conceives a calculated attachment which grows into sincere love. But, apparently, the only way he can secure admittance to her father's house is to feign a Christianity which he no longer feels, and to proclaim his intention of taking Orders. Thus he wins upon Sidwell's father, and, through his intercourse with her,

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upon Sidwell herself. But the deceit poisons his life, for the facts became known to several people, and Sidwell's materialistic brother, bent upon Peak's destruction, exposes him. Only Sidwell's magnificent love remains staunch; and even she, in the long severance of their lives, grows afraid to link her own life with his when unexpected affluence makes Peak at last independent. So Peak, after wandering, dies abroad, as much socially and spiritually in exile as he has always lived.

It must be borne in mind that Gissing never shirks the exhibition of Peak's intellectual powers; he seems to demonstrate them with candour and effect. Moreover, he stakes his emotional appeal upon a scene between Sidwell and Peak, a scene which, I think, for sustained power and truth, is unapproached elsewhere in Gissing's work. Sidwell herself is a fine study; subtly is Peak's feeling for her shown in the terms of his own temperament:—

Comparison of her with others had no result but the deepening of that impression she had at first made upon him. Sidwell exhibited all the qualities which most appealed to him in her class; in addition, she had the charms of a personality which he could not think of common occurrence. He was yet far from understanding her; she exercised his powers of observation, analysis, conjecture, as no other person had ever done; each time he saw her (were it but for a moment) he came away with some new perception of her excellence, some hitherto unmarked grace of person

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or mind whereon to meditate. He had never approached a woman who possessed this power at once of fascinating his senses and controlling his intellect to a glad reverence. Whether in her presence or musing upon her in solitude, he found that the unsparing naturalism of his scrutiny was powerless to degrade that sweet, pure being.

Rare, under any circumstances, is the passionate love which controls every motive of heart and mind; rarer still that form of it which, with no assurance of reciprocation, devotes exclusive ardour to an object only approachable through declared obstacles. Godwin Peak was not framed for romantic languishment. In general, the more complex a man's mechanism, and the more pronounced his habit of introspection, the less capable is he of loving with vehemence and constancy. Heroes of passion are for the most part primitive natures, nobly tempered; in our time they tend to extinction. Growing vulgarism on the one hand, and on the other, a development of the psychological conscience, are unfavourable to any relation between the sexes, save those which originate in pure animalism, or in reasoning less or more generous. Never having experienced any feeling which he could dignify with the name of love, Godwin had no criterion in himself whereby to test the emotions now besetting him. In a man of his age this was an unusual state of things, for when the ardour which will bear analysis has at length declared itself, it is wont to be moderated by the regretful memory of that fugacious essence which gave to the first frenzy of youth its irrecoverable delight. He could not say in reply to his impulses: If that was love which overmastered me, this must be something either more or less exalted. What he did say was something of this kind: If desire and tenderness, if frequency of dreaming rapture, if the calmest approval of the mind and the heart's most exquisite, most painful throbbing, constitute love—then assuredly I love Sidwell. But if to love is to be possessed with madness, to lose all taste of life when hope refuses itself, to meditate frantic follies, to deem it inconceivable that this woman should ever lose her dominion over me, or another reign in her stead—then my passion falls short of the true æstrum, and I am only dallying with fan-

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cies which might spring up as often as I encountered a charming girl.

Beyond this lengthy passage, there are others which show an equally firm grip upon Peak's character, and the way in which it is most tensely affected by the uprearing of his love for Sidwell and the half-amazed sense of her love for himself:—

His native arrogance signified a low estimate of mankind at large, rather than an overweening appreciation of his own qualities, and in his most presumptuous moments he had never claimed the sexual prefulgence which many a commonplace fellow so gloriously exhibits. At most, he had hoped that some woman might find him *interesting*, and so be led on to like him well enough for the venture of matrimony. Passion at length constrained him to believe that his ardour might be genuinely reciprocated, but even now it was only in paroxysms that he held this assurance; the hours of ordinary life still exposed him to the familiar self-criticism, sometimes more scathing than ever. He dreaded the looking-glass, consciously avoided it; and a like disparagement of his inner being tortured him through the endless labyrinths of erotic reverie.

In such a grandiloquent tone is the whole book carried through, but on an intellectual level which Gissing never elsewhere allowed himself. It is clearly and unashamedly an intellectual novel, based upon a comprehension of the point of view of a powerful personality. Sluggish *Born in Exile* may be, slow in its machinery, paltry in some of its subterfuges and minor in-

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terests; but it moves with a measure, and gains its effects from its own steady, confident growth. It is, in fact, consistent in such a degree as to establish its own importance. For once, Gissing's explanatory method justifies itself; the book makes no attempt to move by means of sentimentality or false reasoning. From the author's brain to the reader's brain its appeal is unhesitatingly made; and the story invites thought and sympathy rather than more emotional response. Yet it has momentum and it is moving. It is more tragic than any other of Gissing's stories, because it is free from self-pity. It is large and turgid in expression, and has a seeming ponderousness fit to deceive the facile reader. But its sincerity and its dignity of intention are everywhere visible.

The problem of *Born in Exile* appears to us now, perhaps, remote. It is hard to imagine how Peak, with his strength of personality, failed so to express himself as to make his admission to intellectual society certain. His case is not at all that of Dyce Lashmar, in a later book, for he was in no sense a charlatan, but one who thought fearlessly and had the power to hold his own in talk. His continuance in exile is to us inexplicable. Gissing perhaps saw more truly the effect of temperamental deficiencies: it may be that Peak's power of apprehension was not equalled

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by his power of original thought; and his ambition, essentially a vulgar ambition, which Gissing does not seem to realise, may arise from unconscious mediocrity. It is clear that Peak's desire for a life of super-refinement, grotesque though it is, has the author's serious approval; the book is for this reason humourless. It lacks simplicity; but it has qualities and a mental vigour which override its obvious shortcomings. Although substantial, it avoids stodginess; although serious and even, at times, pompous, it yet manages, by its sincerity, to avoid a solemn ridiculousness, such as other novels making pretensions to intellectuality have complacently sported. And, above all, its essential parts are human. It is the personal history of Godwin Peak that is told, not simply the story of his failure in a gratuitous pose. Far more than his ambition is portrayed; we do get, convincingly, a picture of his relations with environment and with persons. And, since Gissing was working in autobiography, there is a note of authenticity in the subject-matter. It is unfortunate that *Born in Exile* represents the summit of the author's achievement. For now, with the exception of three books—*The Odd Women*, *Eve's Ransom*, and *The Whirlpool*—his novels show, I believe, a marked decline.

Denzil Quarrier, which was published in the same year as *Born in Exile*, is a book of little power. Married to a man who was arrested immediately after the ceremony and imprisoned for several years, Lilian Allen subsequently formed an irregular union with Quarrier. Their secret was told only to Denzil's friend Eustace Glazzard, but Glazzard, growing jealous of Quarrier, puts the husband on the track of Lilian, and the girl commits suicide. Political scenes in a small town, and a speech by Quarrier, do not serve to give life to the story, which is throughout unattractive and mechanical.

Mechanical, too, is the opening of *The Odd Women*, where Gissing, who by now had habituated himself to the writing of novels, sought to strike the book's key-note on the first page. This he proceeded to do in *The Odd Women* and *In the Year of Jubilee*, which are occupied with the position of women, both odd and married. So, in *The Odd Women*, we are faced immediately by the decision of a careless, improvident doctor to insure himself for a large sum; which resolve is duly followed by his sudden death and the consequent poverty of his many daughters. That only three of these should survive, that one should live in constant old-maidish ill-health,

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that another should become a secret drinker, and that the third—and youngest—should meet and marry an unappetising man of middle-age, suggests that we are in the midst of a problem. "The family," says a benefactress of these unfortunates, "is branded. They belong to the class we know so well—with no social position, and unable to win an individual one. I must find a name for that ragged regiment." Gissing, in the same quandary, chose that of "the odd women," but in doing this he was so heavy-handed as to bewray himself. The odd women are chosen with equal doggedness, and we cannot easily shake off our dissatisfaction at the method, even when the book becomes illuminating instead of merely illustrative. It has variety in the picture of Rhoda Nunn, who remains unmarried, indeed, but only by a moment's wavering when her struggle with a masculine nature equally strong has reached its climax. Rhoda is the chief character in *The Odd Women*, another of Gissing's fine portraits of women: the other characters are mostly repulsive. Widdowson, the only visible husband, is, we may hope, exceptional; as, in a way, is young Mrs. Widdowson's lover. Both of them, however, are painfully convincing, the one in his jealousy, the other in the philandering which shirks its outcome. Virginia Madden, when not quite herself, is great.

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Drunken people we have had in plenty; but the stages of secret tippling have rarely been described. It is to Gissing's credit that Virginia's conversation, her delays, her breathless and wandering descriptions of journeys and sights, are unhesitatingly handled. Her sisters are less good, and young Mrs. Widdowson, in particular, is never realised. Her meeting, late in the story, with the decayed Miss Eade, is grotesque; and only the ferocious consistency of Widdowson's behaviour saves the scenes between the two from being ineffective. Widdowson himself is cast in the same mould as Alfred Yule, in *New Grub Street*, and is by no means entertaining; but one cannot refuse to believe in his personality and its grisly effects upon himself and his wife. But the conclusion of the book, where the young wife dies after child-birth, where Virginia enters a home for inebriates, and where the characters are all in as low a state of vitality as can be imagined, is—somehow—rather ridiculous. Unfortunately Gissing did not distinguish between inevitable grief and that form of sentimentality which insists that there shall be no redeeming feature. *The Odd Women* therefore ends as badly as it began, and vies with *The Nether World* for the doubtful distinction of being the most depressing book he wrote.

In another aspect *The Odd Women* is a power-

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fully expressed plea for intelligence and truth in marriage relations and in the education of women. Gissing declares that "the female sex" cannot be raised from its then low level without asceticism, a revolt against sexual instinct. He also says that "one of the supreme social needs of our day is the education of women in self-respect and self-restraint," an opinion which remains as true now as it was when first written. On the subject of marriage, one of the characters truly observes:—

"Our Civilization in this point has always been absurdly defective. Men have kept women at a barbarous stage of development, and then complain that they are barbarous. In the same way society does its best to create a criminal class, and then rages against the criminals. But, you see, I am one of the men, and an impatient one too. The mass of women I see about me are so contemptible that, in my haste, I use unjust language. Put yourself in the man's place. Say that there are a million or so of us very intelligent and highly educated. Well, the women of corresponding mind number perhaps a few thousand. The vast majority of men must make a marriage that is doomed to be a dismal failure. We fall in love it is true; but do we really deceive ourselves about the future? A very young man may; why, we know of very young men who are so frantic as to marry girls of the working class—mere lumps of human flesh. But most of us know that our marriage is a *pis aller*."

But quite the most notable protest against the corruption of instincts and ideals is contained in a passage which attacks conventional novelists. If it is old-fashioned now in respect of our most

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admirable writers (for the novel may be said to be approaching, via realism, a new and valuable position as an expert view of life), it yet shows Gissing in a characteristic mood, not quite able to see life whole, but very intent upon expressing the things which stand clear in his mind.

“If every novelist could be strangled and thrown into the sea we should have some chance of reforming women. The girl’s nature was corrupted with sentimentality, like that of all but every woman who is intelligent enough to read what is called the best fiction, but not intelligent enough to understand its vice. Love—love—love; a sickening sameness of vulgarity. What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists? They won’t represent the actual world; it would be too dull for their readers. In real life, how many men and women *fall in love*? Not one in every ten thousand, I am convinced. Not one married pair in ten thousand have felt for each other as two or three couples do in every novel. There is the sexual instinct, of course, but that is quite a different thing; the novelist daren’t talk about that. The paltry creatures daren’t tell the one truth that would be profitable. The result is that women imagine themselves noble and glorious when they are most near the animals.”

Even the last sentence, which some may regard as naïve, is, properly speaking, a penetrating thrust at the inveterate romanticism of women. Whatever Gissing may have been, he was sternly unromantic.

VII

It may be imagined that when Gissing was fairly started upon the relations of the sexes, he

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was not to be deterred from further study. His next three novels, accordingly, deal with marriage and with the casual association of more or less unsuited people. *In the Year of Jubilee*, an elaborately but ill constructed book showing signs of exhaustion, is about a girl who, loving too strongly, seduced a young man, and (although married to him) had extraordinary difficulties in concealing her maternity. The reason of the difficulties was that she would only benefit by her father's will if her marriage remained undiscovered until she reached a certain age. At length her child, and the long parting from her husband, so improved her nature out of all recognition (even, on the reader's part, out of all acceptance), that she became a magnificent wife. Her husband, now obsessed by the idea that happy marriage consists in separation, talks alarmingly to prove this belief; but his energy dissolves in speech. Nancy and Tarrant, however, are not the only married people in the book, and there is more precise virtue in the horrid picture of a battered clerk and his virago. Bitterly does Gissing comment upon this unfortunate man:—

Before his marriage he had thought of women as domestic beings. A wife was the genius of home. He knew men who thanked their wives for all the prosperity and content that they enjoyed. Others he knew who told quite a different tale, but these surely were sorrowful exceptions.

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Nowadays he saw the matter in a light of fuller experience. In his rank of life married unhappiness was a sure thing, and the fault could generally be traced to wives who had no sense of responsibility, no understanding of household duties, no love of simple pleasures, no religion.

Here was hatred indeed; and Nancy, who discovered that Nature did not intend a married woman to be anything but the slave of her husband and children, is presumably by this time an ideal wife. Indeed, one finds Gissing's outlook narrowing, as though he had never really believed in individual liberty, but was increasingly tired of the eagerness of conventional people to achieve some sort of distinction. Henceforth we find him inclining more and more strongly to a modification of the "domestic point of view" which in *The Emancipated* he found so despicable. The desire for a home, an ideal home of fires and burnished fenders, and spotless linen; of the pleasant warm smell of inoffensive cooking, with blinds drawn and lamps alight on cold, wet November evenings—this became his most precious thought. Love and peace and quiet life; a gentle figure on the further side of the hearthrug; comfort, no struggle, exquisite contentment in a series of slow occupied days. . . .

From such a reverie he bestirred himself to look shudderingly upon *The Whirlpool*, where Alma Rolfe, soiled by her ambitions and her avid acceptance of flattery, brought herself by

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evil paths to an overdose of a potent drug. Her father a company-promoting suicide; surrounded with flatterers; insulted with dishonourable proposals from a millionaire, and yet not strong enough to keep him at a distance in later years, Alma is fevered and neurotic. Rolfe, a book-loving man, wanting her confidence, and giving her as much freedom as possible; Hugh and Sybil Carnaby; the little composer-concert-agent; the harridan who betrays Alma; and Alma's stepmother—Mrs. Frothingham—are all powerfully drawn figures. Less believable is the millionaire whose sexual appetites are so large and range so wide: he belongs to the same type as the manufacturer in *A Life's Morning*. The book is marked with anxiety and harassment, but resembles rather the stirring of muddy waters than the authentic whirlpool which the author aims at presenting. How should a man, whose experience of the world was so small and so unwilling, reproduce the life of the world convincingly? He could give us firm characters, and, in spite of the broken interests involved in his unfortunate technical method, could keep us afraid of impending disaster; but he could not persuade us that he had intimate acquaintance with company-promoters, and sensual millionaires, and neurotic amateur violinists. As soon as it is done, the book falls into a vague blur of

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words and opinions, and we are quickly indifferent. We have not looked upon a whirlpool: we have been present only at an interesting attempt at illusion. For able, talented, remarkable as Gissing was, he could not continue to produce books without experience of life: he was forced to throw too great a strain upon his intellect and his inventiveness. He stippled in his effects, conscientiously, instead of drawing them with confidence and the support of experience. He explained here, just as he did in his earliest books, because revelation—the proof of experience as opposed to thought—was impossible to him. He might say as sanely as possible, “Marriage rarely means happiness, either for man or woman; if it be not too grievous to be borne one must thank the fates and take courage”; but that faculty of explicit statement is not good novel-writing. He could write two pages analysing Alma’s character (pp. 245-6); but, as he said himself in his book on Dickens, “Very rarely has analysis of character justified itself in fiction.” Yet what else could Gissing do? He *thought* his characters, and thought them as clear as life, but never as warm and vital. His very great talent enabled him to do this in book after book; but *The Whirlpool*, which is a good and honourable book, is not a fine book because it is steadfastly invented, and not imagined out of experi-

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ence. Experience and imagination are required for the writing of novels: Gissing, when he could draw upon his experience, revealed his true insight; but his imagination had been stultified by much reading, and his experience was so small and so shrinking as to be useless when it stood up to his ambitions. To call a book *The Whirlpool*, to project a great novel with many lives set struggling against all contrary influences, that is heroic: to do it with Gissing's equipment was offering hostages to despair.

VIII

I have intentionally spoken of *The Whirlpool* out of its due chronological order, because the short novel *Eve's Ransom* seems to deserve separate treatment. It is really no more than a sketch, yet it has a value quite its own. A young man named Hilliard unexpectedly recovers money owed to his father, throws up his pettifogging employment, and leaves the provinces for London and Paris. The money he has come by is only £436, too little for useful investment, and, to Hilliard, sufficient only for an hour of glorious life. Before leaving Dudley, he sees the photograph of a beautiful girl, which so attracts him that he makes a point of carrying with him to London messages for her from his

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landlady; and after a time in Paris he seeks her out. At her old address he finds she is no longer known; and although he begs for information of her, none is forthcoming. Gissing says:—

It very rarely is under such circumstances, for a London landlady, compounded in general of craft and caution, tends naturally to reticence on the score of former lodgers. If she has parted with them on amicable terms, her instinct is to shield them against the menace presumed in every inquiry; if her mood is one of ill-will, she refuses information lest the departed should reap advantage. And then, in the great majority of cases she has really no information to give!

All of which is both humorous and true. Hilliard finds Eve at length, in company with a bright girl who serves in a music-shop. She proves different from his idea, but still tantalising; and his desire is without doubt to serve her. That Hilliard, by a loan, and by taking her (with Patty, the musical girl) to Paris, should save Eve from an unprofitable liaison with a married man, and that they should become engaged, is all made extraordinarily interesting. But Eve, bewildering in her every action, presently grows still more mysterious in her unsuccessful endeavours, on her return to Birmingham, to get work. At length Hilliard finds that, while still engaged to him, she has practically promised to marry his acquaintance Narramore, whom she has met independently. Narramore is a rich man; and Eve, not in any sense heartless,

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prefers Narramore's comfort and affection to whatever Hilliard can offer.

The book is not cynical; it is a piece of romance. It has a curious and haunting quality. Eve is one of the best of Gissing's several astonishing studies of women—Harriet Casti, Lydia Norman, Isabel Clarendon, Miriam and Cicily in *The Emancipated*, Amy Reardon and Marian Yule, Sidwell Warricombe and Marcella Moxey, and Rhoda Nunn. These are fit company for Eve, and a fine assembly from the work of a single novelist; and Eve in many ways is the most singular of all. It is possible to understand all Hilliard's base doubtings, and to sympathise with his fire: to the end Eve remains subject for conjecture, a baffling and intriguing personality.

IX

Gissing's last three legitimate novels, *The Crown of Life*, *Our Friend the Charlatan*, and *Will Warburton*, are all marked by a lesser degree of incisiveness than his earlier books. *The Crown of Life* is of course love—not marriage. Mrs. Bonsoff makes that perfectly clear half-way through the book.

"When I say love," she says, "I mean Love—not domestic affection. Marriage is a practical concern of mankind at large; Love is a personal experience of the very few. . . . You can no more choose to be a lover, than to be a poet."

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And the book accordingly sets forth the story of Piers Otway's continuous love for the lady who first inspired his studious youth. Only when Irene has been once engaged, and when Piers has with difficulty supported himself for several years, is the marriage finally arranged. Nothing Gissing wrote could lack personality, or firmly drawn characters; but the buoyancy of *The Crown of Life* is inflated, and the book is so very nearly conventional as to have little importance. There are also one or two very sentimental passages—in particular one where the author imagines “some girl, of delicate instinct, of purpose sweet and pure, wasting her unloved life in toil and want and indignity; some man, whose youth and courage strove against a mean environment, whose eyes grew haggard in the search for a companion promised in his dreams; they lived, these two, parted perchance only by the wall of neighbour houses, yet all huge London was between them, and their hands would never touch.”

Between Piers Otway's father, a famous agitator, whose speech is very like that of Carlyle, and a small character in *Our Friend the Charlatan*, who talks like a mixture of Gratiano and Dr. Shrapnel, there is a similarity. Both show that Gissing was now relying more and more on types with literary forebears. Yet Dyce Lash-

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mar, the charlatan, who has "never quite believed in the brilliant future which he liked to imagine," is interesting. The book is, however, rather poor; it lacks spontaneity. Lady Ogram, the rich woman who purposes forcing Lashmar into Parliament, Constance, her secretary, who confronts him with proof of his charlatanry, Miss Tomalin, who sends him an egregious anonymous message, are none of them edifying figures; and the extravagance of the end, where Lashmar, everywhere foiled, marries the twittering Mrs. Woolstan, to find that she has lost most of her fortune, is displeasing.

Will Warburton is the story of a young man who lost his own money and that of his mother through the recklessness of his friend and partner, and who set up as a grocer in Fulham. It is entirely pleasant and readable; but it has no serious value as art. Gissing could no longer, in his last four novels, deny himself the pleasure of giving his characters their deserts, and thereby, no doubt, he did something to redeem himself in the popular mind from a charge of persistent gloom.

X

In the year in which he died—1903—Gissing published *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, which was much praised in the press, and

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which achieved a distinct success with the public. The reasons for this success were, no doubt, several, but the most notable was perhaps that Gissing's very personal statements about the life of Ryecroft were taken as applying to himself. Readers who had no taste for his serious novels came upon these private papers and felt sorry for the author of them, who had evidently suffered much in his lifetime. Another reason was that the book is written with unusual simplicity; it is really honest, clear writing, with a natural grace. The style is far from that of *Demos* or *Born in Exile*, but has a lightness and apparent ease that is pleasant to the literary palate. Also *Ryecroft* does, as has been said, contain very obvious references to Gissing's life, and the public, which responds readily to the personal note, was glad to find the "gloomy" author so much of a human being. Apart from its autobiographical interest, which is considerable, the book seems to me to have less merit than is generally supposed. Its intellectual quality is quite undistinguished; and if the book were not so absolutely unpretentious, there are passages which would not be regarded as having any value at all. What value *Ryecroft* has lies almost entirely in its expression of a personality; and this personality is precisely that timid one which represents the less admirable side of Gissing's work. The book

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is that of a recluse, of one who has fled from a life that makes too many demands upon him. Gissing, having begun his literary life as a bookish man, goes back to his books, after years of unsparing struggle, as the best things in life. Except to the bookish, who are but incomplete men, without "the zest of life" (having lost that virtue in the zest for books), life is of more value than books. It is beginning to be held, by bookish men, that interest in life is usurping, in artists, the place of importance hitherto held by art; but it is by original observation of life that art receives its inspiration. It is, to me, a pathetic thing to see an artist, whose labours had brought him an honourable place among men, thankful at an escape from life. It is an admission of tiredness, of a message given, a strength spent. And at an age when many writers are girding their loins for fresh exploits, Gissing produced *Ryecroft*, the last book of which he saw the publication. Compared with *Thyrza*, with *New Grub Street*, or *Born in Exile*, *The Odd Women*, or *Eve's Ransom*, is this book really going to hold its place? Surely it is less valuable; it contains less brain, less insight, less endeavour. It has literary charm, but not in a supreme degree; its criticism, of Shakespeare and of other literary matters, does not outstep the casual thought of the literary man; and while it

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lacks robustness it never attains to that fineness and delicacy of perception which would enable it to deserve all the lavish praises which it has received. If it were really an excursion into the region of pure character-study, if Ryecroft were an imagined person, it would have some claim to be regarded as a *tour de force*. This, however, is not the case. Ryecroft's temperament is in essentials the temperament of Gissing; and we are forced back upon the literary quality of the book as its prime claim to our attention. I do not think that its literary quality is far enough removed from the power of many cultured men to justify the book's inclusion among the major works of Gissing.

IV, SHORT STORIES

I

THE art of the short story, it has been sufficiently explained by critics who specialise in short stories, is very different from that of the novel. Mr. Max Beerbohm, in a reckless mood, once said that as the brick was to the house, so was the short story to the long one (and it is true that the novel makes in every way greater demands upon the imagination, the invention, and the staying powers of the author); but it is well known that Mr. Beerbohm is a law unto himself in these matters, and others, taking his words in a very literal sense, have thought differently. Gissing might have agreed with Mr. Beerbohm upon the most literal interpretation, for he wrote two little books which were either very long short stories or very short novels; and of his legitimate short stories (by "legitimate," I mean those which do not exceed eight or ten thousand words), quite a number are very small novels, while others again are the merest sketches.

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Some of these last, perhaps, do not quite justify themselves. They start, and they end; but otherwise have no positive qualities. Others, again, have a pleasant and enjoyable flavour, and justify themselves completely, since they have character and kindness, and show the author's literary sense.

There are two volumes of Gissing's short stories—*Human Odds and Ends*, and that posthumous collection edited by Mr. Seccombe, *The House of Cobwebs*. The former contains twenty-nine "stories and sketches," the latter fifteen stories, mostly in the author's later key of gentleness and tolerance. Several of them cover ground already used by Gissing—or perhaps one should say that they are a second crop from the same ground—and they all have a quaint air of familiarity, very welcome to any reader acquainted with the author's longer works. They are by no means as good as some other short stories of their day; and their interest as a collection is a personal rather than a pressing one. But they are not negligible. In *Human Odds and Ends*, it seems to me that some of the sketches have no value—such a one as *In No Man's Land*, for example, is almost entirely without merit. It is about a man who knows of a string of houses without a landlord, in which people for years have lived rent-free. This man tries to take

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possession by peremptorily assuming control. He goes to the length of having the houses painted; but in the end he is forced to acknowledge defeat. Such an idea might possibly be made richly comic by a richly comic writer; but in Gissing's hands it produces but the ghost of a smile, as any damp joke might do in retelling. It becomes, in fact, pointless, since it is without character. Such another story as *In Honour Bound* is likewise difficult to explain. A philologist, finding himself ruined, confesses to his landlady that he has very little money; and she, on the point of buying a business, asks for some of it to assist in the purchase, and keeps him alive for months until he is again self-supporting. The philologist, intending "in honour bound" to ask if she cares to marry him, is then told of her marriage to another, and is warned by the woman's servant that the new husband would not like him about the house. The only real interest the story has is that it slightly foreshadows the idea of *Will Warburton*, where the hero, being ruined, hears from his landlady of a grocer's business which is for sale, and buys it. But *In Honour Bound*, even if it were true to an actual case, is not artistically probable; and Gissing's method does not give it verisimilitude. On the whole, therefore, it is not quite worthy of serious consideration.

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Other stories in the same volume have far more value, even if it is slight. Such a story as *An Inspiration*, rather Dickensian and fairly sentimental, is interesting on two counts. First of all it imparts a faint warmth of pleasure to the reader, who is gratified at the spectacle of happiness for the downcast; secondly it relates to "Harvey Munden," an interlocutor several times employed by Gissing in both volumes of short stories. At first I supposed Harvey Munden to be intended for Gissing himself, but one of the stories in *The House of Cobwebs* is told in the first person, with Munden for a second figure, and in no case does he attain to any character at all. So his existence, or at least the recurrence of his name, is mysterious, and beyond explanation. *Sing a Song of Sixpence*, *The Day of Silence*, *The Tout of Yarmouth Bridge*—all have qualities of some description. *The Justice and the Vagabond* is another episode of interest, relating how a wife-ridden J.P. meets, in the course of his judicial work, a vagabond schoolfellow of his own. They take advantage of the absence of the J.P.'s wife to plan a dash to the far regions of the world; but the J.P. is overtaken by death before he can start. This is well told and good. For the rest, *Human Odds and Ends*, although modestly entitled, does not belie its name. It would have

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suggested poverty of invention had we not the far richer collection of *The House of Cobwebs* to restore our confidence.

II

Even in *The House of Cobwebs*, we become aware that Gissing had his own conception of the short story. Most of the stories in *The House of Cobwebs* are little narratives, depending hardly at all upon surprise or concentration, and consisting of a series of slight events which may be rounded off into a tale. They are, in short, undramatic. If, without pledging ourselves to any particular definition of what a short story should be, we notice the lack of drama in Gissing's two collections, we perceive a particular fact. That fact is, that the dramatic quality is implicit in most effective short stories—either in the sense of surprise, or unexpectedness, or conflict, or incident. When we find the incidents in Gissing's short stories humdrum, or mild, we recognise that we had expected to be stirred in some way, or to be given some precisely poignant moment, whether of suspense or sympathy. The lack of this emotional heightening in the whole of Gissing's work is notable; in his short stories it becomes, according to the dramatic test, a positive defect. It is a defect in

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the sense that the stories are not, regarded technically, short stories at all, but merely short as contrasted with long. There is, in essentials, no difference between *A Song of Sixpence* (in *Human Odds and Ends*), which is about a woman whose evil habits have been checked by disaster, or *Humplebee* (in *The House of Cobwebs*), and such a novel as *Eve's Ransom*, or *Denzil Quarrier*. The superficial difference is entirely one of area.

So it is with the volumes contributed to the "Autonym Library" and to Cassell's "Pocket Library"—*Sleeping Fires* and *The Paying Guest*. These stories are perhaps 30,000 words long, whereas many of Gissing's full-length novels contain 150,000 words; yet, except for the fact that they are written as separate tales, they might almost, as they stand, form contributory portions of longer books. This, strictly speaking, is not the art of the short story as it is generally understood. It is the art of the episode, an art which has hardly received acknowledgment as an art at all. So far, indeed, is that from being the case, that a book like *The Nether World* may be rightfully condemned as episodic, which means that it does not progress unerringly from chapter to chapter, but is made up of segments or sections which show their joins and let the reader's interest lapse.

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Yet if we take these short tales for what they are, we shall see how well they illustrate one aspect of Gissing's art—that of characterisation. He had a very keen sense of those slight personal eccentricities which, duly emphasised, may be made to suggest character in a book. His imagining of character, I should say, was not a strong point, because he never had the jolly visualising faculty of a Dickens, nor the detachment of a modern novelist. His bookish heroes were all inclined to run to one sensitive, retiring pattern, since his sympathy with other types of male was small. His women characters are very much stronger and better, possibly because a slight acquaintance with women, a good deal of intuition, and much self-communing may produce portraits of highly subtilised women transcending the acquaintance of ordinary men. That is to say, where portraits of men demand actual experience of men's ways, the woman of fiction is much more highly conventionalised, besides, of course, being much more interesting, experimentally, to a male novelist.

When Gissing drew character, he did it in firm outline; but he was not always equal to its expansion. His characters—particularly the men—gradually slide into sensitives, or they run between straight lines. Now the art Gissing possessed, of being able to shake up a character in a

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few words, was particularly useful to him in short stories of the kind we are now considering. A reader does not need to remember the characters in a short story: he wishes simply to retain an impression of the whole thing. So characterisation in short stories is required to be, for effect, sharp and typical; and Gissing's method, which, on a different plane, was the method of Dickens, was adapted to the short story. He would describe somebody as "a middle-aged man, bald, meagre, unimpressive, but wholly respectable in bearing and apparel"; or "A young woman of about eight-and-twenty, in tailor-made costume, with unadorned hat of brown felt, and irreproachable umbrella; a young woman who walked faster than any one in Wattleborough, yet never looked hurried . . . who held up her head . . . and frequently smiled at her own thoughts." The persons, once seen, are recognised sufficiently for the purposes of Gissing's short narrative. The reader has seen, or can delude himself into the belief that he has seen, just such people; and the short story has no room for subtleties of characterisation. Just so does Gissing hit off the people in his less notable novels: "A younger girl, this, of much slighter build; with a frisky gait, a jaunty pose of the head; pretty, but thin-featured, and shallow-eyed; a long neck, no chin to speak of, a low

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forehead with the hair of washed-out flaxen fluffed all over it. Her dress was showy, and in a taste that set the teeth on edge. Fanny French, her name." In a long novel, such a method of characterising people loses its effect, because while it is desirable that the majority of the dramatis personæ should be easily referable to type by the reader, they should present themselves primarily as individuals. In the Gissing short story, on the other hand, the method is used with dexterity, and the stories, being easily read and admirably handled, are in every way enjoyable. They make no great demand upon the reader's emotion, but are intelligible and sufficiently absorbing. And they contain frequent portraits of Gissing's inveterate foes—landladies.

Gissing, whenever he writes about landladies, does so from first-hand knowledge. He writes of them always with feeling—in *Born in Exile*, in *Will Warburton*, in *Eve's Ransom*, in *The Nether World*—it would be possible to marshal such a collection of landladies as to reveal the species in hideous array. So in the short stories, particularly in *The Prize Lodger* (*Human Odds and Ends*) and in *Miss Rodney's Leisure* (*The House of Cobwebs*). Well does Gissing cry from his heart, in *In the Year of Jubilee*: "To occupy furnished lodgings, is to live in a house owned and ruled by servants; the least tolerable

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status known to civilisation." Mrs. Turpin, the minor heroine of *Miss Rodney's Leisure*, is seen with humour: presumably Miss Rodney treats her as Gissing would have wished all landladies to be treated by their tenants—in a spirit of chastening reproof.

A Daughter of the Lodge is a little pointless, as is *A Poor Gentleman*; and *A Charming Family* is, although clever, unpleasantly cynical. Otherwise, the contents of *The House of Cobwebs*, in addition to being cheerful, are well written and entertaining. To say that they do not challenge comparison with the best English short stories is in no sense to deny their merits. The lack of drama, the lack of any especial poignancy of motif, leaves them smooth and gracefully written tales.

III

The Paying Guest is a bright little story of the suburbs, rather similar in vein to *The Town Traveller*. A young couple, desirous of adding to their income, agree to receive as guest a girl who finds her own home unbearable. It seems that her mother has married a second time, and that her stepfather also has a daughter by his first marriage. The rival daughters quarrel particularly over a lover, who transfers his affec-

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tions from one to the other. Accordingly, this rather flamboyant girl comes to stay with the suburbans, sets their circle in turmoil, and unexpectedly marries an old and determined suitor. This, however, does not happen until the house has been set on fire by reason of the suitor's ardour. The story is not very merry, and its humour runs to violent and grotesque action; but it is sustained, and does not fail to amuse.

In quite a different key is *Sleeping Fires*, which opens in Greece and deals with the meeting between a man and his illegitimate son (both ignorant of the relation), and their instant attachment. The son, however, dies before his identity is fully disclosed; and interest is then demanded for the father's resuscitated love-story. *Sleeping Fires* is slight; but it is characteristic Gissing, and has passages of good quality, which show how lightly Gissing could design and execute when he had a subject fit to his hand.

These two stories afford the author an opportunity for easy and pleasant writing, quite distinct from the labour which obviously belonged to the writing of their immediate chronological neighbours, *In the Year of Jubilee* and *The Whirlpool*. The year 1895, indeed, which saw the publication of *Eve's Ransom*, *The Paying Guest*, and *Sleeping Fires*, is one of happy tasks lightly performed; and while neither of the pres-

ent stories is the equal or even the immediate inferior of *Eve's Ransom*, it may perhaps be inferred from the author's success in such shorter works that he would have been more comfortable as well as more successful if the Victorian novel had died decently before he began to write. It is obvious from Reardon's painful struggles with the three-volume book that Gissing found irksome and laborious the excessive length required by the public. His own case is very little improved nowadays, when many commercial publishers stipulate beforehand that the stories they purchase shall consist of not fewer than 75,000 words; but it is clear that much of what went to the bulking of Gissing's long novels was strained and conscientious page-filling. How much better if the English reader did not count the number of words in the books he buys! If Gissing had written other simple narratives of the same kind as *Eve's Ransom* and these two short novels, his best work, by being purged and simplified, would have stood clear of the wreckage of the Victorian tradition by which it is now encumbered.

V

DICKENS

I

IN an immortal scene, where Mrs. Gamp, after relieving Mrs. Prig at the Bull in Holborn, looks out of the window, Dickens makes his supreme feminine creation remark, "I'm glad to see a parapidge, in case of fire, and lots of roofs and chimley-pots to walk upon." Later, the same lady declares the easy-chair to be "harder than a brickbadge"; and in her further conversation we perceive that she has a habit of inserting the letter "g" into a host of common words which do not actually need its support. This practice, the one-time existence of which we have no reason to doubt, was probably extinct by the year 1870, in which, synchronising with the introduction of a Great Popular Education Act, is laid the scene of Gissing's first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*. Yet when Arthur Golding, in that novel, goes out with the villainous Bill, who is disguised as a blind beggar, the latter carries the following declaration:—

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CHRISTIEN FREEDS

Pray consider a widowed Father
The victim of a Explosion
And may God bless you.

I imagine the wording and spelling of this notice to have been directly inspired by Gissing's love of Dickens. That love, Gissing himself tells us, began when he read *The Old Curiosity Shop* at the age of ten, and it is delightful to read further (in an article in the New York "Critic") that Gissing enthusiastically demanded the frequent attention of his elders for passages subsequently read aloud from *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens was, in fact, as great an idol in the Gissing family as he is in the families of all thorough English folk.

The love which began so early, and which we see (unless I am mistaken) faintly illustrated in Gissing's first novel, was to last a lifetime. It is one of the pleasantest things in the purely literary work of Gissing to find over and over again traces of his sincere and critical admiration of so great a novelist as Dickens. Such a character as Mr. Boddy, the grandfather of Thyrza and Lydia Norman, is entirely Dickensian in its tenderness; even the bold Clem Peckover, in *The Nether World*, has a suspicion of Sally Brass; and other pictures, for example the supper near the beginning of *Demos*, or the

strange meeting of Goldthorpe and Mr. Spicer in *The House of Cobwebs*, seem to derive from Dickens their particular "manner." It is to Gissing's credit that these suggestions of direct influence are few: although *The Town Traveller* has been called Dickensian, the comparison is unintelligent, and due only to the fact that, at the time of its publication, Gissing wrote a study of Dickens. The book has a superficial air of good-temper, which one may, if hard up for comment, describe as something like the exuberant fancy of Dickens, but similarities of method are to be discerned in Gissing's pathos rather than in his humour. His humour was always literary and characteristic: his one or two eccentric characters are built out of his own imagination, and not out of any special debt to the writer he so admired. In pathetic scenes, however, it is possible to imagine a striving after the genuine pathos (as distinguished from its maudlin travesty) of such work as Charley, in *Bleak House*, and other characters which particularly impressed him.

When, in 1897 (also the year in which *The Town Traveller* appeared), he published a critical study of Dickens, Gissing showed his enthusiasm in a perfectly legitimate way; and he followed this up with one or two articles—*Dickens in Memory*, and *Dickens* in a series of

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essays by various writers on *The Homes and Haunts of Famous Writers*—and with a few introductions to the Rochester edition, never completed, of Dickens's works. Also, he so abridged and edited Forster's life of Dickens as to remove all irrelevancies and reduce it to less than half its former bulk. Gissing's writings about Dickens contain not only the best criticism of Dickens that has been produced; they are in every way admirable and creditable to himself. The introductions to particular novels (I believe only those to *Oliver Twist*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Bleak House*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Pickwick*, and *Nickleby* were published) are as good, in their way, as the little book in which Gissing summed up the characteristics of Dickens's work as a whole: they are full of delicate commentary which shows the writer at his happiest. Gissing was sympathetic without being uncritical. He condemned Dickens to an extent which led him at one point to protest against misconception; but he very strikingly warned readers that to judge the author of *Copperfield* by strictly modern standards was "something worse than dulness." With Gissing's own methods of judgment, and with the artistic and personal questions which they raise, it is the purpose of the present chapter to deal.

Gissing, having made through the eyes of Dickens a visionary London of his own, came to London as a very young man and set about going "hither or thither in London's immensity, seeking the places which had been made known to me by Dickens." He speaks of having been stirred, "not to imitate Dickens as a novelist, but to follow afar off his example as a worker," and adds: "From this point of view, the debt I owe to him is uncalculable." It is easily seen, therefore, in what spirit he undertook the little book in "The Victorian Era Series." No other modern literary subject could have appealed to him more strongly. This one above all others was bound to produce that "enlightened enthusiasm" which Lytton said was the best criticism. And also it gave Gissing an opportunity of expressing his opinions upon many questions of art. His lucidity was here of the first importance; his appreciation of Dickens's humour an illumination of his own character; his ease showed how naturally his mind turned to books and found its material. As he says of his subject, "Here is the secret of such work as that of Dickens; it is done with delight—done (in a sense) easily, done with the mechanism of mind and body in splen-

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did order." The words are true of his own little book.

Dickens stands in relation to his time as a humorist and a social reformer. His first novel, *Pickwick*, is the work of the humorist; his second, *Oliver Twist*, is the work of the social reformer. But his reforming zeal very rarely killed the humorist; rather, his humour was the magnificent impulse of his work, and the generosity which sprang from his vital enjoyment of life became an understanding that other people also had rights in happiness. Gissing insists that Dickens was never a democrat, that he never demanded that the poor should be raised above the status of poverty. "Morally, he would change the world; socially, he is a thorough conservative." This perhaps does not quite accurately express Dickens's position, for he was essentially a practical man and worked for much-needed material reforms. The writer's own bias was probably responsible for his confidence in the conservatism of Dickens, for it is clear that Gissing's view of the matter is satisfactorily contained in his own sentence. When it comes to the question of the Poor Law, which Dickens denounced in *Oliver Twist*, Gissing objects. In the sense that the Poor Law checked abuses, he holds, it was good. It is, I think, the only social point which is raised against Dickens

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in the whole of the book, and recalls the fact that Gissing was defending the Poor Law as long before as 1880. On this very subject Gissing exclaims: "His partisanship lay in his genius; it was one of the sources of his strength." But mainly, Dickens's strength was his humour. It is admirably said elsewhere that "it is all very well to talk of right prevailing, of the popular instinct for justice, and so on; these phrases mean very little. Dickens held his own because he was amused." "The wonderful thing about such work as this, is Dickens's subdual of his indignation to the humorous note." We see at once that Gissing is at home: he is writing principally of the aspects of Dickens's work which appeal to his own taste; and he is writing as a novelist. It will be found throughout that Gissing's criticism has a basis of purely technical quality. It is professional criticism, not criticism *à clef*, or social criticism, or literary criticism. It is never away from the precise instances: Gissing's training as a novelist was all to the good in his criticism of a great novelist; and he criticised in terms of art, not of eulogy or morality. It is this fact that gives the book on Dickens its peculiar quality. It is not a series of brilliant, splendid dashes at truth, as is Mr. Chesterton's study; nor has it the remote, ghostly

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charm of a literary man's appreciation: it is good, well-considered criticism, which relies for its value upon its clear and sober sincerity.

III

The book is divided into twelve chapters, with such titles as "The Story-teller," "Art, Veracity, and Moral Purpose," "Characterization," "Style," "Comparisons," etc. The divisions alone show how unhesitating Gissing's touch was. He aimed at separating the various strengths of Dickens's work, and at writing upon each a chapter which should be at once allusive and detailed. And in this way, although his personality was rarely intruded, Gissing gave many hints as to his own position, and much scope for comparison. For like Dickens he attempted to portray common life, and, unlike Dickens, he was forced to make the attempt without a transfiguring humour. Take two sentences about the poor, one from the book, the other from a preface. Gissing says: "If Dickens could discover shining examples of such virtue among the poor and the ignorant, their mental dulness seemed to him of but small account." Elsewhere he cries: "If one fact can be asserted of the lowest English it is that, supposing them to say or do a good thing, they will say it or do it in the worst

possible way." Or again, commenting upon the miraculous transformation of Mell, in "David Copperfield," from a poor usher to a distinguished citizen in the Antipodes, he intrudes his own disbelief by saying: "Who would prefer to learn the cold fact; that Mell, the rejected usher, sank from stage to stage of wretchedness and died—uncertain which—in the street or the workhouse?" This comment, so far from being a criticism of Dickens, is rather an interesting side-glance at himself, for his own lack of that same buoyancy which makes all things possible to a writer like Dickens. It was not that Dickens really saw life less truly; it was that Dickens, having a large experience of modern miracle, had the courage to proclaim his belief. Gissing saw all changes of fortune resolving into a steady decline: he had never experienced, as Dickens assuredly had, the hot, excited ups and downs of the happy-go-lucky.

But there was another point in all this, as Gissing well saw. Dickens had an extraordinary sense of the popular theatre. "With the characteristics of that breezy fiction [of the eighteenth century] Dickens combined," he says, "a tendency traceable to his love of the stage, a melodramatic violence, already manifested in *Oliver Twist*, and never to be outgrown." It

was the stage, the popular theatre, that Dickens loved, not so much the Drama, which he understood only in its broadest examples (e.g. "Every Man in his Humour"). His sense was the sense of "the great semi-educated class from which Dickens sprang, and to which, unconsciously, he so often addressed himself." In his humorous and family-gathering conclusions, moreover, Dickens liked to set everything right, and bring all the good characters on the stage for the final curtain. Gissing is protesting against his tendency when he mentions Mell. The point here is not, however, the coincidence of Mell's good fortune with that of the other characters in *David Copperfield*: in his feeling that this was rather too much of a good thing we could agree. It is rather in his view that probability was outraged by Mell's accession to fortune that Gissing made his characteristic refusal to admit happiness and good-fortune as probabilities in this world. We may think it perverse, but at any rate there was no affectation in the belief. He did indeed hold that the dismal was more true than the cheery. He has never been alone in this assumption. There is room in our literature for both Dickens and Gissing, and for their opposed readings of probability. Only when one of them chides the other for excess does the contrast become delightfully absurd.

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IV

Gissing loyally and successfully defends Dickens against the common charge of exaggeration in the drawing of character; and he acclaims Dickens's extraordinary power of "seeing." He knew that the great writer had his characteristic vision of life no less than of individual facts; he was willing to allow Dickens at all times a steady vision of true happenings. "The novelist's first duty," he explains, "is to make us see what he has seen himself, whether with the actual eye or with that of imagination, and no one ever did this more successfully than Dickens in his best moments." "As a boy or youth Dickens was occupied in *seeing*; as a young man he took his pen and began to write of what he had seen." "He knew every stage covered by the travellers; he saw the gleam of the lamps, the faces they illumined but for a moment; the very horses brought out fresh were his old acquaintances. Such writing is no mere question of selecting and collocating words; there must first be vision, and that of extraordinary clearness. Dickens tells us that in times of worry or of grave trouble, he could still write; he had but to sit down at his desk, and straightway he *saw*. Where—as would happen—he saw untruly, a mere fantasm thrown forward by the

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mind, his hand at once had lost its cunning. When vision was but a subtly enhanced memory, he never lacked the skill to make it seen by others." "There could be no better illustration of the difference between Dickens's grasp and presentment of a bit of human nature, a bit of observable fact, and that method which the critics of to-day, inaccurately but intelligibly, call photographic."

This brings us to the subject of realism, upon which Gissing dwells long, both in his book and his introductions. He was always rather in dread of realism, which in his day (and even, apparently, in ours) was largely regarded as something very repulsive and unimaginative. Gissing, of course, lived before the day of the modern realist: he did not see in realism very much more than laborious technical method. Nowadays, it is to be hoped, only very old and very young men hold it in such abhorrence. We are all realists to-day, trying very hard to see without falsity and to reproduce our vision with exactitude. Realism, I think, is no longer associated with the foot-rule and a stupid, purposeless reproduction of detail. As Mr. George Calderon daringly says in the introduction to his fine translations from Tchekhof: "The Realist does not copy Life (the result would be meaningless); he explains it (that is the business of

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Art) and gives his explanation the air of a copy." Gissing, even by such a test, was never a realist. He was too personal. If his bias had been a happy bias, more in accord (as it became) with conventional ways of skimming dark places, he would have produced the best that was in him. As it was, his bias was in the other direction, excusable, infinitely pathetic, but unscientific and unrealistic. He had no appetite for "savours," but he had lived in poverty and in lonely sensitiveness, and against that picture Dickens stands up very convivial and full of hearty spirits. Not retiring, not oppressed with a sense of material cares, this Victorian giant! How strangely do we read, of *Bleak House*, that "we are held by a powerful picture of murky, swarming, rotting London, a marvellous rendering of the impression received by any imaginative person, who, in low spirits, has had occasion to wander about London's streets." There could hardly be a greater contrast than that between Dickens and his admirer.

Certainly Dickens was not a "realist." Gissing says he was an "idealist," by which he means, not the youthful, unhumorous Shelleyan, but one who naturally idealises what he describes. There is a mournful comment upon this idealisation in Gissing's own case in the following obvious allusion to *Thyrza*: "Many a novel-

ist has sinned in this direction; above all, young authors misled by motives alien to art, who delight in idealising girls of the lower, or lowest class." But Dickens idealised instinctively; it was a part of his prodigality; and it was never more worthy than that idealisation of Thyrza of which Gissing himself was guilty. In that respect, both as applied to Dickens or to himself, we may quote Gissing's own vindication, as true here as it is of the charge of exaggeration: "The one question we are justified in urging is, whether his characterisation is consistent with itself." Asked so, we should have no hesitation in clearing away the doubts that arose in the author's mind about the legitimacy of his own portrait.

V

The comparisons of Dickens with other writers, with Hugo, Balzac, Dostoievsky, and with Daudet, are made with admirable skill; and it is particularly interesting at this time to find Dostoievsky treated in an English book with so much courtesy and tact. For all these writers, in their various ways, Gissing professes critical admiration; and the chapter is one of the most interesting in the book. It becomes more and more clear, as a result of reading this chapter, how strongly associated in our minds the name

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of Dickens is with "the healthful aftertaste of self-forgetful mirth." It is Dickens's laughter that will be remembered when his Jonas Chuzzlewits and Oliver Twists have gone the way of dreary old theatrical properties. It is not the shaking, whispering leaves and glooming landscape, foretelling a crime, that we shall remember; but the ready laughter of Dickens. It was indeed self-forgetful. Dickens, recognising that he sometimes fell into excessive caricature, apologised to Lytton, admitting that he took such inexpressible joy in some of his comic scenes that he could not help petting the characters and making himself laugh anew. But then Dickens had laughed all his life, at many of the things that Gissing scorned or prized. He laughed at Mrs. Gamp, as filthy and vile a creature as anybody ever portrayed—think what Gissing would have made her!—and made everybody else laugh too. He laughed at education (but Gissing explains that); and at refinement; and at all sorts of things that Gissing took seriously. Yet he was a great enough man to impose his own humour on his readers; and Gissing was sincere and humorous enough to run with the rest in appraising the work of his master.

Gissing, however, was admirably scrupulous in this book about the virtues and the vices of

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Dickens. His comparison of the treatment of Mrs. Gamp and Alice Marlow is excellent, as is his analysis of the laughter and moral effect produced by an encounter between Sally Brass and her little slavey. It does not spoil Dickens to have his work assayed by so delicate a method as Gissing's; and, on the other hand, the atmosphere of Dickens's books is so well suggested as to recall them to the mind with strange vividness. Indeed, this book reveals a Gissing unknown to readers of his novels. It is a Gissing who approaches more nearly to the man remembered by his friends—genial, ready for laughter, simple and kindly in all his doings. Where his novels contain no spontaneous humour, this single critical book is curiously full of the capacity for laughter. It may be that, having little humour, Gissing was at his best in appreciating; for when he essays humorous scenes, as he does in *The Town Traveller* and *The Paying Guest*, they have noise, but no laughter. Gissing's characters often laugh aloud, never silently. One or two of them—e.g. Alfred Yule and Widdowson—"cackle"; but never with pure self-forgetful mirth. Uncomfortably, savagely, cruelly, they laugh—a melancholy cachinnation. And of humorous conception none of the books shows any sign. Gissing also had none of that deep silent laughter which Carlyle described as the

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sense of humour; and none of that reconciliation of contradictions which Mr. Wells offers as an alternative definition. His jokes are literary; his books about the lower classes contain no sign that poor people have a rich, if mechanical, humour all their own. It is delightful to find that he is at home with Dickens's humour, from which it might have been thought that he would shrink, as too crude. That was the only thing which might have been wanting from this fine book: being present, it makes the whole study invaluable. And a reading of the book on Dickens is essential to a proper understanding of George Gissing. It is almost "self-forgetful," which is to say that it is more simple and unaffected than any of the novels.

VI

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I

THE paramount enthusiasm in George Gissing's life was his love for the classic days of Greece and Rome. From the time when he first read Gibbon, whose History he received as a prize, Gissing was filled with Roman lore: while his interest in Greece lay principally in its greatest literary names, his interest in everything that belonged to Rome was vehement and absorbing. That is quite easily to be understood, for Gibbon's is probably the most enthusiasm-firing history ever written, not at all to be rivalled in its particular qualities by any history of Greece that has been or ever will be produced. So Gissing, caught as a schoolboy in the meshes of Roman history, was to find them to the last his strongest attachment to life. Presumably he came to Gibbon when he was well acquainted with the novels of Dickens. For the rest, these two enthusiasms were to go with him all through his life, the one as a serious intellectual pur-

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suit, the other as a solace in times of exhaustion. Rome and Dickens come very characteristically into his first noticeable novel, *The Unclassed*, where Casti is bent upon writing an historical drama, and where Waymark is projecting novels more veracious than Dickens, with one eye upon his public, could dare to produce. Casti is to write of Stilicho, Waymark is to write novels about the masses—which may not be left lying on drawing-room tables. We see even here two youthful ambitions rising above all others. Both were in some measure fulfilled. Gissing wrote a novel about sixth-century Italy; and it is doubtful whether his books are ever left lying on drawing-room tables. There was a plan made between Waymark and Casti for an Italian trip together, abandoned because of Casti's untimely death; and in Gissing's mind only postponed until such time as he had the necessary money for his fare.

And it was always "classical Italy" that was Gissing's interest. When he did eventually manage to achieve the journey, it was to associate modern scenes with past events, to recall Roman rule in the districts he visited of modern united Italy. The Italy he met with in his travels by the Ionian Sea, although often magnificent in beauty, and suggestive beyond any

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other country, was inextricably confused in his mind with uncomfortable travelling, passing illness, bad food, and degeneracy. He even rejected Robert Guiscard as a romantic figure because "I care little for him after all; he does not belong to my world. . . . The interest of the place suffered because I could attach to it no classic memory."

II

Greece never meant quite as much to Gissing as Rome. His pictures of Greece have never the same fervent love as that which inspires all he wrote of Rome and Roman Italy. It was the literature, the spirit of Greece that he admired; but with a remoteness and a detachment far different from the enthusiasm of his Roman learning. It is true that the waves of the Ionian Sea echo verses of Homer and Theocritus as he listens to them, and that he applauds the gospel of the Greeks—"Vigour, sanity, and joy." Yet even in *Sleeping Fires* he has to argue with himself as to the value of their ideals to the present age, and in the art of Greece he seems to find little more than a touching imagination of "the noblest thought of man confronting death." Greece is irrecoverably lost. In *Ryecroft* he sums up all his thoughts of it in one of the best passages in the book: "Our heritage of

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Greek literature and art is priceless; the example of Greek life possesses for us not the slightest value." He concludes, after expressing grave suspicion that a typical Greek of the Periclean age would disappoint a modern inquirer by his barbarian and decadent attributes: "Leave him in that old world, which is precious to the imagination of a few, but to the business and bosoms of the modern multitude irrelevant as Memphis or Babylon."

Some more vital enthusiasm informs all his references to the Romans. They, after all, are nearer to us; classic Rome is better known in all those details which most appealed to Gissing. Greece was not, in his lifetime, made to live afresh by the modern school of imaginative historians. Professor Gilbert Murray and his allies had not then been active in their endeavours to bring the Greeks home to our common thoughts. While Gissing lived, Greek history was not the living thing it has since become; and Gibbon, a supreme historian, had early awakened Gissing's sense of the reality and the eternal fascination of the Roman Empire. It is not wonderful, therefore, to find his references to Greece and Rome pitched in different keys. His sympathy, being already given to Rome, could not extend beyond a sense of the "classics" and the antiquity of Greece. For both classics and

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antiquity he could feel admiration: Greek life did not awaken his sympathy. "The sporadic civilisation which we are too much in the habit of regarding as if it had been no less stable than brilliant, was a succession of the briefest splendours, gleaming here and there from the coasts of the Aegean to those of the western Mediterranean." It was the splendour of a mighty Empire, very grateful in retrospect to an inhabitant of the modern world, that drew Gissing's mind and held it irresistibly during the whole of his life.

III

It has been said that Gissing received Gibbon as a school prize. From *Ryecroft* we gather that the edition was that of Milman, in eight volumes; while a marvellous exploit with a copy of the first edition is recorded in the pages of the same book. It was, too, a first edition that Julian Casti, in *The Unclassed*, possessed, in "six noble quarto volumes, clean and firm in the old bindings." When he sits down to read the book we are reminded of Gibbon's opening words: "With what a grand epic roll, with what anticipations of solemn music, did the noble history begin!" After reading Gibbon, Casti explains to Waymark that he does not so much long for modern or even for Renaissance Italy.

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"I think most of classical Italy. I am no scholar, but I love the Latin writers, and can forget myself for hours, working through Livy or Tacitus. . . . The mere names in Roman history make my blood warm.—And there is so little chance that I shall ever be able to go there; so little chance."

When Gissing wrote that he was perhaps twenty-six, looking out and forward upon life with confidence in his talent. It is easy to imagine how galled he must have been during the next few years, when, in spite of incessant labour, he found himself no nearer his escape to Italy. Moping, as he suggests, in London, he became slowly passionate in his longing for the country of his dreams. When, in Goethe's *Italienische Reise*, he read of one to whom the desire for Italy became a scarce endurable agony, the words represented his own feeling; and "if I had not seen the landscapes for which my soul longed, I think I must have moped to death." After the publication of *Demos*, which had a sufficient success to reach a second edition, he was able at length to travel as he had desired. With what enthusiasm may be dimly gathered from *The Emancipated*.

With the help of sunlight and red wine, he could imagine that time had gone back twenty centuries—that this was not Pozzuoli, but Puteoli; that over yonder was not Baia, but

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Baia; that the men among the shipping called to each other in Latin, and perchance had just heard some news of the perishing Republic.

In every glimpse of scenery in *The Emancipated*, indeed, the spectacle is not simply one of the scene before his eyes. It always calls up the thought of Rome; the conscious literary reflection is for ever present. Truly Gissing took with him to Italy his vision of Italy. Whereas he can report with fervour, in *New Grub Street*, the memory of a sunset at Athens, simply as a piece of scenic description, in Italy he is like some waking Roman, trying always to read the past in and below the present.

IV

The same feeling is apparent in his legitimate travel-book *By the Ionian Sea*, a brief, unpretentious account of a ramble in Southern Italy. In this, Gissing is gracefully personal and unaffected, writing from his own interest in the things he sees, in a manner which one would suppose very similar to that of his conversation. Descriptions of the places he visited; speculations as to their Roman states; accounts of journeys, and sights, and hotels; stories of various hotel servants, and a delightfully characterised little doctor—these make the book what it

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is. What erudition is displayed is carried lightly, and if *By the Ionian Sea* is not quite a masterpiece (for it lacks distinction), it has much interest for the reader of Gissing. Again he makes profession of his love for Greece and Italy, and attests their power to "draw" him. Again there are illustrations of his, to anybody less refined, rather amusing insistence upon culture and refinement as supreme needs, and upon "things of the mind." "Things of the mind," indeed, is a very excellent phrase by which Gissing avows his limitations: it is always to these, and never to things of the spirit, that he is staunch. Naïvely, he writes here: "Of course the Tarentine never reads; the only book-shop I could discover made a poorer display than even that at Consenza. . . . How the women spend their lives one may vainly conjecture." But the vanity of conjecture in this case lies surely in the implication that a bookless village is abandoned to unworthy pursuits. To put too high a value upon books is to reveal a lack of humour; and only two or three times does Gissing do this in *By the Ionian Sea*. One of the occasions I have just shown; another is in the serious references to a bookish sea, already instanced; and the most serious occurs on the last page, where irrelevant complaint is made on behalf of one "who cannot shape his life as he will,

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and whom circumstance ever menaces with dreary harassment." Elsewhere the charm of Gissing's character is fully displayed, in such measure as to support the testimony of one of his fellow-travellers, on another visit to Italy, that he was a delightful companion, and one whose company infallibly provoked delightful happenings by the way. It is said of Gissing that in Italy he was always seen at his best, full of quiet fun and happy allusion. For Italy, to him, was a land still rich in magnificent memories, a country that had been the centre of the greatest united empire that the world has ever known. Italy was far more to Gissing than to any casual wayfarer; every step was made upon "haunted, holy ground," full of memory and interest. It is little wonder if he was at his best in the part of the world to which his heart turned in youth, and in which were buried the heroes of his most devoted reading. Wherever he spoke of Latin authors it was with deep, sincere affection, unlike the self-consciousness which he showed in referring to English writers. And it was Rome to which he was most constant. Even when Rolfe, in *The Whirlpool*, had doubts of history, as the "lurid record of woes unutterable," it was but a passing mood: how much more real and delicious is the frank exclamation: "Ever since the first boyish reading of Gibbon, my imagina-

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tion has loved to play upon that scene of Alaric's death!"

V

Veranilda, the novel upon which Gissing was engaged at the time of his death, is very far from being the hasty work of the casual student—of Gibbon or even of Italian history. It is set in an obscure period—that of the sixth century—at the time of Totila's march upon Rome. Actual persons, including Totila and Pelagius, are introduced, though without special portraiture. Even one of the principal characters—Marcian—seems to be an expansion of a real double-dealer of whom practically nothing is known. The foundation of the story is slight enough. Basil, a young Roman, loves Veranilda, a Gothic maiden; and their enforced parting and eventual reunion, after imprisonments and treacheries, are of comparative unimportance. Gissing's effort has evidently been to recreate the air of the times in which they lived, rather than to tell a striking story. Accordingly, the book is full of very careful and even distinguished historical writing, which is good evidence, even if we had no other, of the author's devotion to ancient things. Of character the book has little, and when characterisation is attempted it is less vivid than the mere descrip-

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tion. *Veranilda* contains fine passages, and is written with really astonishing confidence and freedom from the self-conscious picking-out of historical facts which generally deaden a romance of ancient times. Of course it has the flatness inseparable from all but the finest and least scrupulous historical stories; but it is never undignified, and moves without painful stiffness.

In another way, also, *Veranilda* is remarkable. It is very much more dramatic in handling than any other story by Gissing. The scenes are treated in a dramatic way; the speeches, when long, have eloquence; and when they are short they carry a distant echo of human voices. The dramatic quality may have been occasioned by the fact that historical novelists almost invariably employ a certain stiffness of speech, so that they may suggest antiquity; or it may have been due to a conscious change of method on Gissing's part. I incline to the latter explanation, for this reason. In books where much explanatory or historical narrative is made necessary by the setting, some degree of heightening in the effects and speeches is used as a purely technical device, to avoid a dead level of literary interest. Gissing perhaps saw that if he followed his usual course of relying upon narrative his venture would sink of its own weight. It followed that he cast his plot and exhibition of character in scenes

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easily detachable (though not so to the wise reader) from their scholarly setting of history. That the book gains by this use of a semi-dramatic method is unquestionable. It enables us the better to visualise the rather picturesque scenes of intrigue or violence. We are not, it is true, moved; but we are edified. We are made to recognise the ease with which Gissing moved among these ancient people—an ease born of long association and urgent thought. No book could have gained more from blazing vision or from imaginative glow—these things Gissing never had, and it is useless to expect them. But no book more surely reveals his care and insight. Considering that the MS. was unfinished when he died, it is quite surprising to observe the perfection with which each chapter is written, and to become aware, when the last page is reached, that the final sentences are as full of form as they would have been if the book had been perfect. This fact alone would assure us of Gissing's conscientiousness. That conscientiousness alone does not make great art we are aware; but its presence in *Veranilda* would explain (if explanation be needed) why Gissing's work must always be treated with respect. For the book is free from lapses; it is almost free from commonplace. It is restrained, thoughtful work, full of quality, which all who

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care for letters must appreciate and value highly. Lacking in splendour, it is still singularly able, and never amateurish as historical novels are apt to be. Gissing's faculty of clear sight was never better shown. So with his skill of lucid expression, which is everywhere to be observed by those who look for such things.

VI

From *The Unclassed* to *Veranilda* is a long stretch of twenty years; but Gissing's last book was surely an inevitable one to any reader who gathered from *The Unclassed* in what direction the author's bent lay. We might wonder whether the attempt to use the background of the sixth century was not originally delayed by popular distaste for historical novels of far periods, just as we know that it was a little delayed by a glut of such novels. More probably, however, Gissing never had the required peace of mind to set himself to so quiet and studious a task. He must have been gathering his material during much of the time that is filled for us by the publication of his other novels. For ten years he had thought of *Veranilda*, and its writing caused him far more labour than that of any of his other books. But it was delighted, hopeful labour. "I think I can make it fairly

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good," he said, "for I have saturated myself with the spirit of the age. It ought to be infinitely picturesque." Whether it be picturesque or not, the book could only have been written with such assurance because the author felt perfect command of his resources. It stands for us, with *Dickens* and *By the Ionian Sea*, as the part of his production which represents Gissing's most expert work, the work he did with enthusiasm, because he was drawn to it by taste and inclination. Travail it may have involved, but never toil. The toiling Gissing receives our sympathy, because the enforced continuance of uncongenial work is exhausting. In these books, however, we are permitted to see a Gissing who was not oppressed with tasks. His manner is neither deprecatory nor shrill; he writes with the purpose of increasing our knowledge of the things he loves.

VII

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I

IT has been said already that Gissing began to write at a time which was unpropitious to the production of original work. The flood of the Victorian novel had expended itself; and too many writers were following on in its wake with "stories" and diffuse works of little distinction. In the nineties, when Gissing was at the height of his talent, a new impulse was felt, but in the eighties there were only a few belated Victorians, a few brilliant exceptions, and the parasites of those who were dead. Gissing, well-read in the Victorians, had the originality or the misfortune to abandon their benevolent tone, and his temperament was perhaps an additional power in the overthrow of the purely sentimental and moral attitude revealed in their work. But he was still hampered by their methods. In the longer works of the Victorians, continuity was sacrificed to variety of interest, with the result that the art of construction was unknown

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except in short works or in those where "plot" was important. Gissing despised "plot"; he had the instinct of the true artist in relation to probability and consistency. At the same time, while he built several elaborate structures—none more so than *Demos* or *The Whirlpool*—he was Victorian in his notions of construction. Many threads go to make up most of his books, threads interwoven with, for the most part, sincere regard for not improper interrelation. In the control of these threads, he was completely sure and capable: even when his main erections caved in for want of the support of experience he preserved his sense of proportion. That, in any writer, would be a feat of strength. In Gissing the historical sense was very strong; and that may account for the manner of his control. Intricacies of scheme everywhere delight the reader who can perceive them. But the method which involves a large scheme, embracing a section of life, carries with it a particular defect that is very hard to overcome. It gives the appearance of too greatly diffused interest. Only a novelist with very strong constructive or imaginative power can overcome the defect; and Gissing was too absorbed in care to develop the one or the other. The result, as Mr. Arnold Bennett well says, "is that he seems never to centralise the interest. His pictures have no cyno-

sure for the eye." This was partly due, no doubt, to his sense of life as turmoil, and in so far as it is due to his large conceptions it is a strength. But lacking the heroic sense, and without that glow of the imagination which can carry us beyond the consciousness of an author's technical method, Gissing managed somehow to pitch his work in too low a key. He studiously avoided exaggeration and drama (except when his invention of normal incidents failed and led him to the use of conventional expedients), and a climax is instantly smothered in obedience to his sense of veracity. That, so long as the method is successful, could not fail to command our respect: it is where it is unsuccessful that we perceive a fault. It is as unsuccessful in *The Whirlpool* as it is in *The Nether World*. On the other hand, *New Grub Street* almost presents the air of a microcosm. If the chapters did not so mechanically switch the interest unprogressively from one set of characters to another, we should be convinced and delighted. As it is, *New Grub Street* is nearly as arbitrary as *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The method is the method of Dickens, and as the entertainment provided is less superhuman we are made to feel the machinery. There is no momentum, no sense of irresistible life pushing forward. We read with apprehensiveness, which in itself is a com-

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pliment; but as we recognise the author's skill the illusion is interrupted. It is only when we view the book as a whole that we recognise the artistic aim by which it was inspired. And even so we recognise the intellect rather than the imagination of the writer.

When Gissing turned from the reproduction of society to themes more simple, and gave his mind to the stories of particular individuals, the artistic gain is clear. *Eve's Ransom*, for example, is free from anything which might hinder the concentration of the reader's mind upon the main theme. In a less degree we may see this method used in *Born in Exile* (though here there is a good deal of superfluous matter which can easily be separated) and in the two firm stories in *The Odd Women*. The novels published after 1898 are all more satisfactorily constructed: unfortunately their construction was conventional in another sense, and the material was possibly thinned by a failure in mental energy rather than by any momentous change of technical plan.

II

Of the characters in Gissing's novels, those which stand out most clearly in the recollection are the women. For calm beauty we have Sidwell Warricombe; for the type which was per-

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haps modern in 1893, Rhoda Nunn; for mystery, Eve Madeley is easily the most memorable, a baffling figure; for humanity, Amy Reardon. Others there are, less impressive. Thyrsa is certainly the most exquisite portrait in the whole series of novels, fragile and charming; and her sister Lydia is the personification of goodness and loyalty. Such unattractive but virtuous girls as the two in *Demos*, Emily Hood in *A Life's Morning*, Annabel Newthorpe, Jane Snowden, and Maud Enderby, all have the author's regard, but their virtue is too ostentatious, and they have less vitality than some of the others. Marian Yule is admirable; and Isabel Clarendon rivals Eve in speculative interest. Quite the best of Gissing's portraits of women, however, seem to me to be his two experiments in *genre*—Mrs. Mutimer in *Demos* and Virginia in *The Odd Women*. They are creations.

Of the men, perhaps less can be said. The Denzil Quarrier type of rather beefy insensitives, which comes into play where needed as a foil to the principal male character, has not much reality; and there is a likeness in the brooding egoists who take, for the most part, the chief positions, that robs them of individuality. Godwin Peak is an exceedingly subtle study; Reardon, and Biffen, and Milvain, and Alfred Yule in *New Grub Street* are enough to make the book

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richer in character studies than any other of Gissing's works. Sidney Kirkwood, in *The Nether World*, is well suggested, and some of the thoughtful mechanics in the early books have good and careful work in them. In the main, however, the interest in Gissing's male characters belongs to temperament rather than personality. In his drawings of sensitive, jealous, idealistic men, fundamentally alike, yet subtly differentiated by means of the parts they play in the general scheme, he is always interesting, and sometimes wonderfully good. Often we are given profound insight into their minds, into the complexities of their self-tormenting, into the *nuances* of their personal attitudes. They are seen subjectively—too subjectively, for the effect is sometimes spoiled by too much psychological argument and too vague a general outline. A sensitive, we find; and interesting—but imperfectly characterised. Such a fault was perhaps inevitable, for as one of the critics of Henry Ryecroft said, with acerbity: "All his thoughts and opinions express the man who has . . . relied on his own point of view, receiving nothing from the life around him, and giving it neither understanding nor sympathy. . . . If Mr. Gissing should edit the reciprocal feelings of the people of Exeter [in whom Ryecroft found no interest], the volume might be a lively

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commentary on Ryecroft's." They were all solitaries; all, from Waymark and Kingcote to Will Warburton, tremendous walkers and country lovers, but none of them ever had an instinct to see himself with the eyes of others. Gissing did not spare them; he saw their common fault, but he recognised it as ineradicable. He was always a better and a finer man than the persons of his books, but in essence he was himself almost always the author of their being.

III

Two or three ideas appear very frequently in all Gissing's novels. One, very loyal and good, represents his desire for the emancipation of women from their ignorance and subserviency, and is, I should imagine, based upon very clear thought. He says that "the preservation of the race demands in women many kinds of irrationality, of obstinate instinct, which enrage a reasoning mind," but is none the less firm in his belief in women as capable of activities hitherto monopolised by men. It would be absurd to labour this point, but it may be noted that Gissing wrote at a time when few novelists were engaged in expressing such views. But he was not merely a theorist. Both Sidwell Warricombe and Rhoda Nunn were women of con-

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siderable character; Ida Starr, in *The Unclassed*, had nobility and determination; many of Gissing's other women-folk were by way of being great readers, desirous and capable of independent judgment. And of women as a sex the shrewd analyses scattered through his books show his opinions to have been well founded. As an example of his penetration, the following may be quoted. It comes from an early book—*Isabel Clarendon*—but it is as just as it is inclusive.

A woman mentally occupied with woman possesses a lucidity of reasoning, a swiftness of apprehension, a shrewdness of inference, which may well render her a trifle contemptuous of male conclusions on the same subject. A very few details are enough for her to work upon; she has the categories by heart, and classifies with relentless acumen. It is the acme of the contradictions of her nature. Instinctively revolting against materialist views when held by the other sex; passionately, fiercely tenacious of spiritual interpretations where her own affections are concerned; the fountain of all purity that the world knows, she yet has in her heart that secret chamber for the arraignment of her sisters, where spiritual pleas are scoffed at, where the code administered is based on the most cynical naturalism. She will not acknowledge it; she will die rather than admit the fact as a working element of her own consciousness; but she betrays herself too often.

But if women are to be educated, mankind is also to be emancipated—from dogma. Gissing had all the sensitive man's hatred of overbearing dogma. He was himself intolerant, but he had

no sympathy with any bigotry other than intellectual bigotry. Religious dogma, the conventions of politics, the manners of respectability had no appeal to him. Peace as a universal religion seemed to him the one hope of mankind; democracy in power promised the destruction of natural beauties and the substitution of pure materialism and industrialism.

Dyce Lashmar, in *Our Friend the Charlatan*, speaking under the influence of the "French book" from which he obtains his opinions, writes:—

I am a Socialist—but not a Social-democrat; democracy (which for the rest has never existed) I look upon as an absurdity condemned by all the teachings of modern science. I am a Socialist, for I believe that the principle of association is the only principle of progress. . . . What the true Socialism has to keep in view is a principle of justice in the balance of rights and duties between the few who lead and the multitude who follow. In the history of the world hitherto, the multitude has had less than its share, the ruling classes have tyrannized. At present it's pretty obvious that we are in danger of just the opposite excess—Demos begins to roar alarmingly, and there'll be a poor look-out for us if he gets what he wants. What we need above all things is a reform in education. We are teaching the people too much and too little. The first duty of the State is to make citizens. . . . When the principle of association, of solidarity, becomes a part of the very conscience, we shall see a true State and a really progressive civilization.

Gissing explains his own mature feeling still further in *Ryecroft* where, carefully discrimi-

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nating between individuals and a class, he writes:—

I have known revolt against the privilege of wealth . . . but I could never feel myself at one with the native poor among whom I dwelt. . . . I came to know them too well . . . I knew the poor, and I knew that their aims were not mine.

Emancipation from dogma was the real emancipation he desired. Education, he thought, made life very much harder to live, but education meant escape from dogma, since "most people who are capable of independent thought rapidly outgrow the stage when compromise is abhorred." He was almost, in fact, what is generally called nowadays a Humanitarian. It is true that he was strongly individualistic, and that he scorned Vegetarianism (it is curious that animals do not figure at all in his books); but in his desire for a non-dogmatic faith he was constrained to believe in a sort of Pacifism. His sensibility was such as to suggest that if his sense of personal wrongs had been less keen he would have expressed a theoretical belief in Humanitarianism apart from its sentimental dogmas. Narrow faith was intolerable to him. His revelation of the character of Miriam, in *The Emancipated*, was vicious in its distaste. His orthodox clergymen are always grotesque.

But naturally Gissing was too wise a man to attempt a perilous consistency. Views of various

kinds are expressed freely in his books, and we who try to discover his own feeling are always liable to take for his own opinions some which he intended to be merely characteristic of an individual. He was, for example, peace-loving; yet he was often provoked by irrational general notions. On the subject of children he expressed himself strongly, in such a way as to run counter to much humanitarian feeling. It seems to have been his idea that parents should not have direct relations with their children until the latter were ten or twelve years old. He was indignant because "people snivel over the deaths of babies," and saw nothing to grieve over in this matter, since if children die the probability is that they *ought* to die, in order that the fittest may survive. Children, perhaps, did not appeal to him: they only occur as properties in his books. The children in *Workers in the Dawn* are the merest Dickensian puppets; in *Thyrza*, *Demos*, *The Nether World*, *New Grub Street*, *In the Year of Jubilee*, and *The Whirlpool*, the characters of the children are non-existent. They have names, and sometimes make tiny speeches; but that is all. In the other books babies sometimes become ill or die in order to bring about states of mind in mothers or fathers; and in no case do the children serve any useful purpose, since the books go on their destined way

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without more than momentary interruption. If it were not for the remarks upon children in *The Whirlpool*, it might have been assumed that Gissing ignored them altogether. Yet that is not the case. He foresees huge *crèches* for the children of the middle-classes, and protests against the failure of parents to recognise their responsibilities. When one of his characters says that the care of children is a matter for the individual, the interlocutor observes, evidently with Gissing's concurrence: "It's a matter for the world, too." And on the subject of the education of children he exclaims bitterly:—

For the teaching of children after they can read and write, there seems to be no method at all. The old classical education was fairly consistent, but it exists no longer. Nothing has taken its place. Muddle, experiment, and waste of lives—too awful to think about. We're savages yet in the matter of education. Somebody said to me once: "Well, but look at the results; they're not so bad." Great heavens! not so bad—when the supreme concern of mankind is to perfect their instruments of slaughter!* Not so bad—when the gaol and the gallows are taken as a matter of course! Not so bad—when huge filthy cities are packed with multitudes who have no escape from toil and hunger but in a wretched death! Not so bad—when all but every man's life is one long blunder, the result of ignorance and unruled passions!

If one reads "Philistinism" for "ignorance" in the last sentence of the quotation, it will be seen

* An opinion repeated in *The Crown of Life*, where one of the characters, naturally a man of the most fiendish temperament, spends his time in devising new means of destruction.

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wherein lay Gissing's quarrel with human nature. He was not so much a "Wild knight" who rides "for ever seeking God," nor a reformer in relation to social affairs: Philistinism menaced his quietude, or his desire for quietude, and was responsible for the ugliness he saw in the life around him. I do not think the word Philistine occurs in his books at all, although it had been popularised by Matthew Arnold; but it expresses all he loathed. In the poor he found little but Philistinism, and in the ignorant of all classes. That he set his standards upon a particular degree of refinement and on a certain way of regarding books was a pity. It robbed his constructive side of strength, because bookishness and refinement are poor ideals in themselves. His other preoccupation, the difficulty of the educated poor bachelor in making friends among the educated class rather than among his economic equals, was another personal affair. It is not impossible for the educated poor man of brains to receive social recognition from those of better equipment. Gissing himself is alleged by others to have done so. It is what Gissing would call "a matter for the individual." Gissing's own experience as recorded by himself was hard and cruel because he self-consciously refrained from following his opportunities. Perhaps his pride was too great; his ambition

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was certainly considerable. And if we find Godwin Peak's social difficulties hard to accept in earnest, we cannot fail to find Gissing's sense of the difficulties of entry, and the lure of refinement, somewhat excessive.

IV

As a lover of Nature, Gissing stands in a very happy light. He attributed his love to the reading at an early age of *The Old Curiosity Shop*,—as pretty a compliment as one might desire to see paid to Dickens. And he was a great Rambler through London, through Southern Italy, through Devon and in the West, and through the home counties of England. In *Thyrza* there are fine descriptions of the lakes, and in the last chapter, of the Sussex downs at a picturesque part. The beautiful counties in the middle of England are described in *Isabel Clarendon* and *Demos*; Yorkshire is the scene of parts of *The Crown of Life*; Devon and Somerset appear in *Born in Exile*, *In the Year of Jubilee*, and *The Odd Women*. In the latter, too, there are again pictures of the lakes. In *The Nether World*, Kirkwood goes with the Snowdons into Essex; and other little sketches of Surrey and Kent appear in *The Crown of Life* and *Will Warburton*. Not all these scenic de-

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scriptions are good; many of them are too formal, and some are too detailed. But there is a sense of the country in the best which sets one smiling with pleasure at the loving care with which they have been written. Just as the walker sees the best of the country, so Gissing, oftentimes roaming haphazard, saw the face of England in his happiest moods. Although alone, he was not solitary in the country. He could, I think, feel more at home with country folk than with town dwellers. He speaks somewhere of not hating all orders of uneducated people. "A hedger, a fisherman, a country mason—people of that kind I rather like to talk with. . . . But the London vulgar I abominate, root and branch. . . . I know so much about them." That is to say, Gissing had to live among them in poverty. The uneducated countryman was seen in a pleasant glow of unaccustomed freedom. Just so was the country-side seen, so that it brings out all the native kindness and simplicity of his character. And when the country was not England he could imagine that the peasants thought more of "things of the mind" than the English; and when he wrote of England at the end of his life, in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, it was to discover that he was English to the core. That is what we

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find him. Sometimes narrow when he thought himself most fine, sometimes sentimental, often intolerant of things which he was only unable to understand, proud, sensitive, "difficult," but essentially a lover of home and quiet life, Gissing was in none of these things un-English. He belonged to the country. He belonged to an intellectual order in which, until late, he found no home. He was dependent upon his fastidious sense of refinement and creature comforts. And he had to live poorly and obscurely, forever at work, chafing at his environment, with the sense of failure upon him. A more robust man might have risen above difficulties, for sensitiveness has never yet been a virtue in material affairs; but as Gissing was, so did he make his own reading of life. We hear of his having no holiday for several years; but eventually he was bound to find solace in the open spaces. And it is pleasant to think that while his one pure travel book is devoted to Italy, the land of his dreams, the last book published in his lifetime—*Henry Ryecroft*—is full of the English country, seen and spoken of with delight and affection. Here, as in *Demos*, his view was that there was "no value in human lives in a world from which grass and trees have vanished."

During the whole of his life Gissing was a wide reader of many sorts of books. In his early days, as is shown in the diary of the heroine of his first book, he read a good deal of philosophy. He was of the kind that reads Shelley fiercely in youth and grows out of Shelley in early manhood. Dyce Lashmar, "chancing to open Shelley," was surprised to find that "the poet of his adolescence not merely left him cold, but seemed verbose and tedious." But Tennyson remained a life-long hero. Among English novelists he certainly gave Thackeray and Dickens the palm; George Eliot's soul he found "miserably conventional"; Meredith he once or twice imitated. For the rest he probably expressed his own view when he made a character in *Denzil Quarrier* say that he only read English novels when he was in need of an emetic. Among foreign novelists he speaks in very high terms of Dostoievsky, of Turgenev, of Balzac, and Victor Hugo and Daudet. Mr. Seccombe says that the last-named was his favourite contemporary novelist. References to the byways of English literature occur in *Isabel Clarendon*, where some Shakespearean criticism is ventured, and where the hero is overjoyed at buying the first edition of "Venice Preserved"; a monumen-

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tal and generally unread work by Sir Thomas Browne is familiarly mentioned elsewhere; and there is a good deal of admirably rendered pedantry in *New Grub Street*, in the conversation of Alfred Yule.

These slight allusions, however trivial as suggesting the extent of Gissing's reading, perhaps illustrate something of its range. Curiously enough, on the rare occasions when he used literary taste as a direct means of suggesting character, he was not very successful. The part played by Dante in the emancipation of Miriam Baske, and the same author's fascination for the agitator in *The Crown of Life*, are interesting rather than conclusive. So, too, Henrietta Winter (in *The Whirlpool*) is not visualised by her love of George Eliot and Christina Rossetti, although the author's intention was to imply by the former an intellectual mediocrity and pre-occupation with ethical problems on the part of Henrietta, and by the latter to suggest spiritual devotion. Otherwise a love for two such writers is much more a psychological problem than an illumination of character. On the other hand, the analysis in *Demos* of Richard Mutimer's library is masterly, followed though it is by a painfully laboured imagining of a future state when the Bible will exist only in "comic"

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editions, and when Shakespeare will be decried as "a mountebank of religious tendencies."

Too often, indeed, there is self-consciousness in the literary allusions. Gissing was proud of his reading, engrossed in it. His manner of referring to famous authors is sometimes distressing in its labour—the manner of a young man still impressed by his own acquaintance with the conventionally-acknowledged "masters of English literature." For example, he was capable of saying (of Mutimer) "English literature was to him a sealed volume; poetry he scarcely knew by name"; or, of Maud Enderby's exploits with Rossetti's poems, "These gave her much help in restoring her mind to quietness." And it was not alone in the early books that this curious stiltedness arose; for in *Ryecroft* he could still allude to Johnson in a phrase that is common to every literary hack—"that rugged old master of common sense!" Nothing could be more terrifying to the book-lover who takes English literature as he finds it.

VI

It would not have been worth while to refer to these lapses if they did not indicate a failure in Gissing's sense of humour. I have suggested that his humorous books are not truly very

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cheery; but indeed Gissing's laughter (which I take to be a different thing from sense of humour) is often—as he said—"from the throat rather than the midriff." There are most curious jokes in his books, accompanied by loud laughter on the part of the jokers, which do not seem quite to justify themselves in print. Absurdities always provoked him to mirth—ineptitudes of phrase or expression moved in him a similar sense of antic merriment to the sense of little boys watching a concealed slide. For instance, in *Born in Exile*, one of the characters has not "met with anything more irresistible" than Hugh Miller's discussion of Noah's collection of animals in the ark. When Miller says insects could only have been gathered together "at enormous expense of miracle," laughter is provoked to a degree. The phrase is, of course, sufficiently absurd; but surely it was almost indecent to excavate it? Similarly, in all good faith, we are shown a character in *Our Friend the Charlatan*, who is extraordinarily amused at two advertisements—one saying that sixty thousand bullocks are annually slaughtered for a certain beef tea, the other that every minute of the day so many of somebody's pills "reach their destination." Moreover, Henry Ryecroft enjoys a hearty laugh because certain steamboats were advertised as "replete with lavatories

and a ladies' saloon." These things are not really the best jokes that could appear in any books; and they seem to show an unhappy failure to see that a joke good enough for telling, among others, to a single companion, is not necessarily good in print. Laughter at them implies satiric censure, a recoil upon one's sense of superiority, and, as such, is not genuine laughter at all. Laughter, to be pure, must be self-forgetful, and this laughter is merely self-complacent ridicule of stupidity. In the same way, all Gissing's travesties of clergymen, from the one in *Workers in the Dawn* to Mr. Vialls, in *Denzil Quarrier*, whose satisfied narrow-mindedness is heavily satirised, are not amusing. They demand that we should laugh contemptuously.

When Gissing wishes to show one of his amiable characters in a humorous mood, he adopts the obsolete method of the late Sir W. S. Gilbert. Gilbert, who got much enjoyment from such a phrase as "a living ganglion of irreconcilable antagonisms," or "I can trace my descent from a protoplasmic primordial atomic globule," and other similar phrases, would have recognised the pleasure that Gissing felt when he made his heroes talk in heightened language, in the substitution of longer words for those in common use. Instead of saying "Say when you're hungry," they observe inanely "Tell me

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when hunger overcomes you." Here again the defect is similar. Just as a humorous thing written in a novel would be pallid if said on the stage, so a certain degree of exuberance must enliven a speech printed. As the demand of the stage is to the written word, so is the demand of the written word to the word exchanged in pleasant talk. Gissing had quite enough humour to be a good and genial friend and companion; but his humour was not strong enough to bear the test of print—particularly, and this is important, when the reader's laughter is expressly demanded. Gissing would have been the first to feel discomfort if he had been *prepared* for a joke, than which preparation few things are more disastrous. Yet he over and over again tries to force his joke home by an introductory commendation. Is it any wonder that the reader is repelled? In humour as in pathos any lack of spontaneity creates a feeling of intolerable confusion; and while Gissing's pathos is almost always written from his heart, his laughter is never the rich merriment of a happy man.

VII

On the other hand, a strong sense of humour, which involves the power to see oneself in relation to the world, instead of seeing the world in

relation to oneself, would have been invaluable to Gissing. He could certainly appreciate humour, if it was sufficiently ridiculous in its manifestation, and we have good evidence of his being naturally jocular in familiar talk. Of sense of humour he had practically none. Otherwise, he could never have permitted himself some of the expressions that fall in the course of the books. "Fanny, sweet blossom!" "To use a coarse but expressive word, he was a hopeless blackguard," "The chances are that you have neither understanding nor sympathy for men such as Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen. They merely provoke you. They seem to you. . . . But try to imagine a personality. . . ." "Let us employ negative terms in speaking of this pair," and so on. All these are self-conscious in a bad and unhumorous fashion. The self-consciousness of the artist is an alertness, a consciousness of his own risk of being misunderstood, an acknowledgment of his own shortcomings as clear-sighted and terrible as that which he makes of the shortcomings of other people. It is never connected with *gaucherie* or constraint. And Gissing, owing to his temperament, was often constrained: one feels him moving stiltedly like a shy man under observation. A sense of the eternal contradictions of life made him indignant: it did not sink into his

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being and beget a true detachment. He had to be content with a strange objectivity which he transcended in his moments of true perception. When it came to his best work he was never bounded by such a theory of art as the one expressed in *Isabel Clarendon*.

He who is giving these chapters of her history may not pretend to do much more than exhibit facts and draw at times justifiable inference. He is not a creator of human beings, with eyes to behold the very heart of the machine he has himself pieced together; merely one who takes trouble to trace certain lines of human experience, and, working here on grounds of knowledge, there by aid of analogy, here again in the way of colder speculation, spins his tale with what skill he may till the threads are used up.

That is the method of the historian. The novelist's business is the exploration of human nature. It is essential that he should know more than he tells, that his story should be based on the assumption that nothing is hid from him. In the degree to which he imposes his own understanding upon the reader is he successful. But a pretence that he is simply a recorder is a barren pretence. It means that he has not imagined the characters, but that he has pieced them together. The novelist is one who makes the springs of human action his incessant study; by intuition, by many means, he learns more of his characters than the reader knows. To pretend that he cannot explain their actions is to profess incompetence. It is this habit of build-

ing or evolving his characters that robs some of Gissing's work of genuine importance. Too often he takes a few scraps of observation or intelligent construction, and presents the reader with his work under the impression that objectivity is the sum of art. Objectivity is simply a part of the novelist's technical method: alone, it makes puppets: only allied with true understanding—with a subjective imaginative method of creation—has objectivity any value. Most inferior novelists never realise their characters at all. In the sense that they see them only from the outside they are using the objective method. Gissing was, at his best, far from the objective method. It was when he was frankly and eagerly personal and partisan that he achieved success. The only exception to this was his remarkable book, *Eve's Ransom*, where he reached a point of detachment never elsewhere attained. That is what I meant by speaking earlier of his unfortunate technical method. It is only when a writer is completely confident, *knowing* that he is right, that he creates confidence in the reader. Gissing, when he was really successful, did not question his own knowledge: having a supreme consciousness of his own power, he wrote from that consciousness. Elsewhere, his work had no considerable imaginative value. It always proved what he calls "good brains and infinite

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labour," but it was shackled by his habits. He was often intent upon proving something; he sometimes moralised, and too frequently drew forth from a single action a disquisition of little significance to the case in point. Like his own Mallard, he was "a curious instance of the puritan conscience surviving in a man whose intellect is liberated." Conscientiousness was the note of his artistic character, no less than of the character of Mallard. The books are full of steady and sincere work. Only when they were written with joy (which does not signify gaiety) were they of original value.

But when we pass in review the work of a man like Gissing we cannot fail to take into account the conditions in which it was written. I have purposely refrained from emphasising this point in the present book because there is no need for me to be an apologist. Apologists in plenty have been found in the past for Gissing, who have been led to suggest that we ought to deal very leniently with his work because he suffered. His sufferings can only affect contemporary judgments. The importance or unimportance of his work as literature or as art is something quite apart from his sufferings. If all men who suffered had their apologists we should have the whole of English literature more choked with piously preserved lumber than it is at present.

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And of course Gissing's best work is quite good enough to stand the test of art. We may say, and obviously it is true, that nobody who has not suffered extreme temperamental discomforts can understand the horrors of producing literary work in such circumstances as Gissing was compelled to support. But the fact that he continued to produce literary work is a proof that it was his chosen occupation, and in the end he was justified by the fame that was his in the last years of his life. Many young novelists (as a library list will show) produce one or two books and relapse into silence. They continue their clerking, or whatever daily drudgery may be their means of livelihood. Gissing could have done the like if a tremendous belief in his own talent had not upheld him. The fruit of that belief is before us. If it is good, as I believe some of it is, the question of the travail behind its production can interest only the biographer. The critic's business is to assay the work, not at all to inquire into the conditions of the author's life. We have no need to inflate an author's talent after he is dead: before his death, by all means let us exalt the good, because we know that the bad will exalt itself.

That is the reason that the present book has sought to value Gissing's books without reference to the author's material prosperity. In the

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sense that the books are crowded with the author's dislikes of the lower classes, of poverty, of narrowness, dogma, insincerity, they must be studied as revelations of personality. Not every poor novelist, however, tells as much of his poverty, or rates it so important, as Gissing. We know now that he suffered, and we know that he was as much at the mercy of his temperament as any other artist. He could not be unmoved by starvation or by base surroundings, although other, less personal, artists have revealed nothing of their own condition of life through their books. That Gissing saw life *through* his own poverty and discomfort is just as much a blemish upon his literary character as is the preposterous snobbery of L. E. L. upon the literary character of Miss Landon. His strength lies in another direction altogether. It lies primarily in the judgment he displayed in his analyses of situation, in his portraits of women, and in his resolute defiance of low standards of work. He lies between the Victorians and the present day, secure of a certain meagre attention from the public, secure of the respect of all who can appreciate the mental qualities of a novelist. That should be a sufficient fame for one who was not driven into novel-writing by the irresistible impulse of his own nature. We may grant Gissing many minor qualities as a novelist, in

addition to those major ones just detailed; but the fact remains unassailable that for a novelist who is afraid of the world, who possesses none of that marvelling ardour which alone makes the great creative artist, he has received since his death as handsome treatment as could be desired. Certain books of his will always be read—*Thyrza*, *New Grub Street*, *The Odd Women*, *Born in Exile*, and *Eve's Ransom* seem to me the best of them—with all the respect and admiration that is their due. Of the highest kind of vivid imagining, of the deepest emotional understanding, of the sure, steady, unwavering knowledge of life they cannot be said to show proof. They remain serious, intelligent novels, marked with fine qualities. In *Thyrza* there is much more fervour than in the others; in *New Grub Street* there is a more comprehensive knowledge of the life described. The others have distinguished merits. But do not let us pity Gissing: let us select what is worthy of sincere admiration, and let the rest die. Gissing himself would surely have desired this, for he was a critic and a man of letters. The fact that he was broken in health sufficiently accounts for the self-pity revealed in some of the early and some of the late books. We shall do him more honour if we disregard it than if we try to exalt it into a virtue.

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A disguised biography of Gissing, under the title of "The Private Life of Henry Maitland," by Morley Roberts, was published almost simultaneously with the first edition of this critical study. It was hastily written, and provoked a good deal of adverse criticism because of its candid portraiture, which some readers considered spiteful. In that estimate these readers did Mr. Morley Roberts great injustice. A reading of the book, of which a new and revised edition has been published in 1923, is essential to a true understanding of the character of Gissing. Mr. Roberts was a life-long friend, and he told what he knew. The first edition of the book contained inaccuracies, and it offended some of those who had been Gissing's friends, not only by revelations concerning the subject of the book, but by its minor portraits of themselves. I do not pretend to the right to judge in such matters; but it seems to me that Mr. Roberts's knowledge of his subject demands the clearest recognition.

A very full list of essays, articles, etc., on Gissing is given by Mr. Thomas Seccombe in his introduction to *The House of Cobwebs*. The most important essays are the following: "Monthly Review" (by H. G. Wells), August, 1904; "Nineteenth Century" (by Austin Harrison), September, 1906; "Gentleman's Magazine" (Anon.), February, 1906; "Owens College Union Magazine" (by A. S. Wilkins), January, 1904; "Literature" (by Morley Roberts), July 20, 1901; "Athenæum" (by C. F. Keary), January 16, 1904; New York "Nation" (Anon.), June 11, 1903; "Times" (Anon.), January 11, 1912. An essay on Gissing is included in Mr. Arnold Bennett's "Fame and Fiction," 1901.

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